

Leadings

I have been trying something new when I ask for things in prayer. My prayers start the same way they have in the past; I think about the problem I am facing and then I ask for help. I usually have something in mind, a sort of instruction for God. The difference now is I try to end with, “Or whatever you think would be better.”

When I told my mom that I was interested in reading the Bible again, she went out and bought a new one and sent it to me. It is *The Message* translation, which is good because I read the New International Version so much when I was growing up that I have a hard time even seeing the words anymore. Seeing familiar verses stated differently helps me read with new eyes. One thing that has surprised me is how short all the stories are. They loomed so large in my childhood that I have a hard time believing they are only a few pages long.

The first biblical character I really connected with this time around was Moses. God knew that Moses was going to need something spectacular, so he sent an angel in the form of a burning bush. But even after God explicitly told Moses what to do, Moses tried to talk God out of it. Moses pointed out all of the reasons he was a poor choice: He lacked confidence, he was not a good speaker, and no one was going to listen to him. Even after Moses eventually came around, he was not exactly saint-like. He was impatient with the Israelites and repeatedly reminded God he was not interested in leading them.

I have never encountered God in a burning bush, but I have experienced unmistakable leadings. The most forceful is like a kick in the stomach. I can't breathe and I know I will not be able to breathe easily again until I do whatever it is that I am led to do. With this kind of leading, the leading usually happens first and I have to figure out why afterward. Sometimes a leading is more of a growing conviction. One thing leads to the next, and I can see each step I am supposed to take. Most often, leadings are more like a whisper, a quiet sense of what I should do and a strong feeling that I need to follow and trust.

Every once in a while I get leadings for other people. Fortunately, this does not happen very often. Usually these are more of the kick-in-the-stomach sort of leadings. Otherwise, I would never have the guts to approach the person and say, “I feel led to tell you....” When this happens, I try to say that I could be wrong. I also try to remember that like any other leading, it may not turn out the way I want it to or think it will. But usually, I get some reassurance it was the right thing to do.

The most dramatic example of a leading I have had for another person happened shortly after I met my friend Sarah Peterson. We were both at the Pacific Northwest Quaker Women's Theology Conference for the first time and had barely spoken to each other when I approached her and said, “I feel led to be on the epistle committee, and I feel led to tell you that you should be too.” I was sure she was going to think I was crazy. Instead, she thought for a minute and then nodded. I don't think either of us could have imagined the friendship that would result or that we would together co-clerk the planning committee for the next conference, but I am glad that I followed the leading and that she said yes.

One of the hardest parts for me is to not let fear interfere with leadings. It is easy to convince myself something is not a good idea, and leadings usually take me in directions that make my life more difficult. I am afraid of a lot of things that can keep me from following leadings, including public speaking, ridicule, not having the right words, and never being good enough. But I am more afraid of what I will miss or fail to do by not being faithful.

I know that trying to discern leadings is not something I can or should do alone, so I am constantly checking in with others about my leadings. I go to people I trust, usually friends and family. They probably don't know this is what I am doing most of the time; they just know me well and know whether something is right for me. I also ask weightier Friends for more formal counsel. I am grateful they have been elders to me in the best sense, providing nurturing support and guidance.

In the inside cover of the Bible my mom gave me, she included a reference to Jeremiah 29:11, which in this translation says, "I know what I'm doing. I have it all planned out—plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for." It is scary to trust God and follow leadings without knowing where they are going. But God made me and knows everything I am capable of and the best ways to use my gifts. Even if I can't always see the pattern, I need to have faith God's plans are better than my plans.

The verses that follow are a comforting reminder: "When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I'll listen. When you come looking for me, you'll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I'll make sure you won't be disappointed." Amen.

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