

Sunday, May 20, 2012: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

Casting lots to determine how to fill an apostolic vacancy? Really?

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [May 16, 2012](#) issue

The texts for this week are challenging. The Gospel reading, an excerpt from Jesus' high priestly prayer, is difficult to read aloud. It feels awkward to eavesdrop on Jesus' intimate moments with God, and one can get lost in the anguish of a savior about to die. The author of 1 John sounds cranky, like an ostentatiously religious aunt who cannot resist making a comment to the family atheist during supper: "Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar . . . yes, thanks, I'll have another piece of pie."

Then there's the text from Acts. Jesus had just caught the cumulonimbus back to heaven, leaving his disciples with the promise that the Holy Spirit would be by shortly. In the interim period, the disciples—along with several women—spent most of their time praying together, pausing only to tend to a bit of administrative minutia: what to do about the apostolic vacancy left by Judas. Peter reckoned that Judas's betrayal had been foretold in scripture, as well as the need to come up with a replacement. So the believers identified qualified candidates, prayed for divine guidance and . . . cast lots. Casting lots may have been a standard practice of the era, but still. Really?

Something is off here, like a photograph processed with the wrong chemicals or a concerto performed on an untuned piano. Because this story is sandwiched between the narratives of ascension and Pentecost, it is somewhat godless, bereft of both the risen Lord and the Holy Spirit.

There's no comparing this interlude to the desolate hours between Good Friday and Easter Sunday when the Son of God was a corpse and the disciples had deserted. The resurrection changed the course of history, beginning with the firsthand witnesses. The disciples gained a depth of faith and hope that far surpassed their paltry prior commitment. They trusted that they would receive the Holy Spirit. So

why didn't they wait for the Spirit to come before making any significant decisions?

The text is open-ended; God may or may not have spoken through the casting of the lots. Proverbs 16:33 teaches: "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the Lord's alone." Jonah's shipmates cast lots to identify that he was the culprit of God's wrath and lots were cast to decide which soldier should win Jesus' garments. Did God make these determinations?

I think the disciples got it wrong. It's not that I have anything against Matthias; he is never mentioned again in scripture, though historians believe his apostolic ministry ended in martyrdom. What I question is the wisdom of making any major moves when God isn't present. There is a particular agony in waiting for the Holy Spirit's guidance and inspiration. Many of us aren't patient enough to do it. But we often pay for our impatience.

When Invisible Children's *Kony 2012* video showed up on my Facebook feed, I saw that a wildly diverse group of friends was sharing it, so I watched the film. In the swift and fierce backlash against the nonprofit organization and its manipulation of facts about Uganda and its problems, we didn't hear much from those who were drawn into the narrative. But how could one not be drawn in? The victims, witnesses and experts all offered powerful testimony. "The people of the world can see each other and can protect each other," the narrator all but preached. I signed the Kony 2012 petition and reposted the video. There are places in the world that have been essentially drained of the Holy Spirit, I thought, places where evil threatens to triumph. The abhorrent use of child soldiers by the Lord's Resistance Army is one of them. But the masses were learning the truth, I thought, and that awareness would spark a movement as powerful as Pentecost! As surely as the Holy Spirit chases away the absence of God, the advocates of Invisible Children would harness the power of social networking to eradicate evil.

Or, uh, something like that. After it was revealed that the appeal was grossly oversimplified and filled with misinformation, I felt like a fool. I don't doubt the motivations of the millions who signed the petition, but I was ashamed of my susceptibility—and angry on behalf of the misrepresented Ugandans as well as the millions of young people who may be too jaded to care the next time.

As a more nuanced reality emerged from the dust of Invisible Children's downfall, I realized that I had forgotten to test the spirit and to poke around for evidence of

truth. I was swept away in the zeitgeist, or spirit of the times, and the zeitgeist is not necessarily a holy one.

How do we discern the truth, let alone how to act upon it? There are fundamental criteria about everything from the veracity of a viral video to the will of God. We need to check our facts: what does the scripture reveal, or the credible journalist or the pastoral candidate's background check? We need to wait longer and more patiently. We need to have the humility to seek the advice of experts and companions. And we need to trust that God slips testaments of the truth into our hearts just as a baker hides pinches of yeast in flour.

In the fullness of time, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, we will know. In the meantime we stumble along, casting lots, jumping on bandwagons and making guesses—educated and otherwise. But we do not fall, for we are gripped in the grace of Jesus' prayer for us: Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.