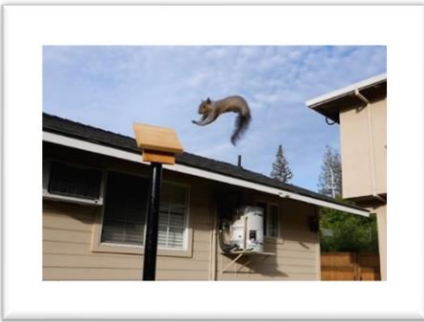


Obstacles

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As bird watchers, my husband and I enjoy feeding birds at home, hoping to entice our feathered friends up close. The perennial challenge is squirrels that gobble up the seed in great quantities and kick out anything they don't like. They also scare the birds away. We've tried the average squirrel-proof feeders with baffles and cages. Squirrels are smart, tricky, agile critters. It made me appreciate the ninja obstacle course that CrunchLabs created to test just how persistent and clever squirrels could be when pursuing the food they loved. You can watch a sample video [here](#). In a short time, the squirrels learned to work the obstacle course, take clever shortcuts, and devise workarounds on the fly (literally).



What, you ask, leads me to ponder squirrels and obstacles courses in my role as your Transitional Presbyter? Well, someone on the Synod Transitions Task Force asked us a question: what holds us back from discerning God's will? To me, that evoked the image of an obstacle course in which we dodge traps, climb ladders, and search for the reward. And that led me to squirrels. My brain works that way sometimes.

In the context of our group discussion about discernment, we spent time in silence, imagining the obstacle course before us. Notably, as we then spoke about the challenges in discerning God's will, we didn't lift up scarcity of resources or people. Those might be obstacles to negotiate *after* we discern God's intentions for us, but they don't limit us in seeking to know what God desires for us.

Instead, we named obstacles of our own making: nostalgia for what was, low energy, competing priorities for our attention. When we focus on the past and the urgent demands of the present, it's hard to imagine our future. We struggle to sit still or be attentive long enough to catch glimpses of the future God offers.

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I return again and again to the promises in Jeremiah 29:11-14: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then **when you call upon me and come and pray to me**, I will hear you. **When you search for me**, you will find me; **if you seek me with all your heart**, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile."

God has no need to place obstacles in our path. Rather, the path is laid clear before us, if we only pray, search, and seek with all our hearts. The obstacles we find in the path are sometimes beyond our control, but too often they are of our own making. Our sorrow over "the way things were" holds back our imagining of anything that might be better. Prioritizing the balls we're keeping in the air can sap our energy for anything new. Can we instead shift our focus to the reward of discerning God's will, with persistence and agility? Can we seek God with all our heart and eliminate unnecessary obstacles? If the squirrels can do it, I'm sure we can, too.