

An Amazing Detour

May 26, 2019

Scripture: Acts 16: 9-15

⁹ During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. ¹¹ We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. ¹³ On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.



As we gathered last Sunday, we explored Peter's vision and the unexpected change of menu that God had in store. That change of menu led the early church to

understand that the whole world was now their mission field. Today we will look at another vision. Today we return to the unlikely apostle, Paul, and to his vision to take the good news of Jesus Christ to a new location. Let us pray...

A man named Michael Billester visited a small town in Poland in the late 1930s, shortly before World War II began. He met a man in the village and gave him a single Bible. The man read it and was converted to faith in Christ. He then passed the Bible on to others who were also converted. Eventually two hundred people had become believers through that one Bible.

When he returned to that same little town in 1940, this group of Christians met together for a worship service and he was asked to preach the word of God. He thought of asking them to give testimonies, but instead he suggested that several audience members recite verses of scripture. One man stood and asked, "Perhaps we have misunderstood. Did you mean verses or chapters"?

The villagers had not memorized a few select verses of the Bible but whole chapters and books. Thirteen people knew all of Matthew and Luke and half of Genesis. Another person had committed the Psalms to memory. That single copy of the Bible given by Billester had sunk deeply into the community and the hearts of those who received it. The results were surprising - that one small Bible bore fruit in hundreds of changed lives. They were unexpected but God-led changes. They were surprising but Holy Spirit led changes.

This morning I invite you to turn to Acts 16 in your Bibles. Although our reading for today begins with verse nine, we will be starting this morning with verse five. Paul has been out on his first missionary journey. He has visited towns in present-day Turkey – Antioch, Lystra, and Derbe. Through the experiences of

Peter, which we talked about last Sunday, and from Paul's experiences on his first mission trip, plus the visions that have come from God, the early church understands that the circle has been expanded. As we talked about last week and were reminded of once already this morning, they now know that the whole world has become their parish. They had begun living into Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations and of all peoples. At the end of his first missionary journey Paul returns to Jerusalem. In Acts 15, James and the other church leaders in Jerusalem use all of this experience and visions and they decide not to require the Gentiles to adhere to all of the Jewish Law anymore. The church now will only ask new converts to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, to abstain from blood, and to abstain from fornication. Later in chapter 15 Paul, Barnabas, Timothy, and Silas, head back out with a letter from the church in Jerusalem, to share this news and to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. The work that occurs at the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey is fruitful. In chapter 16, verse 5, we read that *"the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily"*.

This sets the stage for this little story about Lydia and her household. Paul and Silas are out and about on their second missionary journey to share the letter and to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. At this point they were up in the area around Galatia and they received word not to go to Asia. In verse 6 we read that they were *"forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia"*. Paul and company head on to Troas and during the night Paul has his vision. In verse 9 we read about Paul's vision, where a man from Macedonia says to him,

"Come over to Macedonia and help us". The place that the Holy Spirit had just said was off-limits is now their destination – what an unexpected detour!

Here, let us pause for a moment and put ourselves in Paul's shoes. To do so, let us consider this question: how do we react when God calls us to unexpected places or to unexpected people? How do we react when we are just plugging along, doing what we always do, when God suddenly interrupts and says, *'Hey, come over here'*? I suppose if the redirect came in a vision from God Himself, then we would be a little more likely to respond obediently, right? But the reality is that for most of us, the redirect comes via the gentle nudge or the quiet whisper that is the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit. And the reality for most of us, then, is that the nudge or whisper can be easier to ignore or to not respond to. If God spoke aloud one day or sent us a vision one night, we would certainly be more likely to respond obediently.

In our passage today, Paul has a vision to go to Macedonia. Paul and his companions respond "immediately" as they are *"convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them"*. If I were just so trusting and obedient to the nudges and whispers, if I were just so convinced that God had called, to whom and where would I go? If you were just so convinced that God had called, to whom and where would you go? If we were just so convinced that God had called, to whom and where would we go? This is a question we must all wrestle with. This is a question we should wrestle with as a church.

In response to the vision, Paul is obedient. As Paul and company set sail and head inland, they end up in Philippi, the leading city in Macedonia. On his unexpected detour Paul finds an unexpected audience too. They first spend a few days in the city, getting their bearings. Then, on the Sabbath, they are led to what they think to be a place of prayer – to the riverside. Here they find not a man, like Paul had seen in his vision, but a group of women. In the culture of the day, this would have been a group dismissed by most. Many church leaders would have looked at a group of women and assumed themselves to be in the wrong place. But not Paul.

It was there along the riverside that they sat down and began to talk with this group of women. In verse 14 we read, "*A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth*". Thyatira is a smaller community between Troas and Ephesus. Lydia probably moved to Philippi to further develop her business interests. As a dealer in purple cloth, we assume that Lydia would have been well off. We do know from this verse that Lydia was a worshiper of God. From this we can assume that she was a Jewish proselyte – a convert to the faith. Paul begins to share the good news of Jesus and Lydia is receptive. In verse 14 we read, "*the Lord opened her heart*" to what Paul was preaching. We read that she listened eagerly. The Holy Spirit was at work. Can't you see her eyes lighting up, her attention focusing in on Paul's words, her body edging closer, sitting closer to the edge of the rock or step or whatever she was sitting on, drawing physically closer as the Spirit drew her heart closer to Jesus?

The Spirit leads Lydia to faith in Christ and she and her whole household are baptized right there in the river. Lydia opens her heart to Jesus and then her home to His followers. That day God began an unexpected detour in her life too as she becomes a follower of Jesus Christ. She prevails upon Paul and his companions to come and stay at her house. We can assume that this is to learn more of the story, to grow deeper in her relationship with her newfound Savior. Just as quickly as it began, the story of Lydia ends right here. Lydia's story gets verses 13, 14, and 15. In just three verses, we get the story of one woman and how she came to faith. In just three verses we catch a glimpse of how God can change a life in one momentary experience. My friends, this is the way of God. God usually works to change the world one life at a time.

Lydia had a choice just like the rest of us have: do I listen to God and follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit in my heart? Do I follow where God leads? Lydia opens her heart and then her home to the message of the gospel. Who knows what will happen in her life and in the lives of those she comes into contact with? What will happen because of and through Lydia? Biblical scholars believe that Lydia became a leader in the church that will develop in Philippi. She uses her wealth to support the church and opens her home as a place for believers to gather and to worship God. In fact, later, in verse 23, Paul ends up in prison once again. Upon being freed it is to Lydia's house that Paul returns again before continuing on his missionary journey in chapter 17.

Remember the story of that one little Bible in Poland? Scholars believe that Lydia has a similar story. We too can have a similar story. When are obedient, when we are following the lead of God, we too may find out that one little thing can surprisingly shake the foundations of entire communities. As we go forth this week and as we continue to delve into the surprising acts of God, I invite you, this week, to consider where God might be calling you.

As we saw with Saul a few weeks ago, as we saw with Peter two weeks ago, as we saw today with Lydia, one changed heart is a major event and a big victory for God and for the kingdom. This very week, may God gain a major victory in and through each of us. May it be so. Let us pray...

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Grow. How can you be more open and obedient to the nudges and whispers of the Holy Spirit? How would your faith grow?
- 2) Pray. We connect to God and the Spirit through prayer. Spend some time with God this week, seeking where He is leading you.
- 3) Serve. Paul served by going to the riverside to preach the word. Where can you spread the gospel this week by being the hands and feet of Jesus?