

January 28, 2024

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Acts 16:6-15

We Make Room: Traveling to Unexpected Places

Last week we heard about the council in Jerusalem and the decision the apostolic council made - welcoming gentiles without requiring circumcision. Since then, Paul has been on the road, telling of the decision made by the council and encouraging the churches he started.

There are a lot of locations in this passage! I invite you to take a minute and look at the map found in your bulletin insert and follow the journey. Most of the places mentioned are circled to make it easier to follow. This is part of Paul's second missionary journey. Listen now to the Word from Acts 16:6-15

Acts 16:6-15

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. 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.' 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.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, 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. 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. 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. 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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

There is a lot to unpack in this passage, and a lot to leave us wondering. I will highlight some of those wonderings, so we can let them go and focus elsewhere.

The passage starts with the Holy Spirit forbidding Paul, Silas, and Timothy from spreading the good news of Jesus in Asia and Bithynia. I wonder what that was like? Were there roadblocks along the way? Did they know this through prayer and discernment? Did they all agree about the movement of the Holy Spirit or did they have hard conversations to get on the same page? We do not know how long they tried to go to one place or the other. What we do know is that they ended up in Troas.

And in Troas, Paul has this vision of a man pleading with him to come to Macedonia. We do not know anything more about this vision, except that it compels Paul to make the journey across the Aegean sea from present-day Turkey to Greece, and the Roman province of Macedonia and the city of Philippi. The passage tells us that Philippi is an important city, and a Roman colony. It is the only city that is described as a colony in all of the book of Acts, though we know there were others. These details say something important about Philippi and is perhaps a foreshadowing of things to come.¹ Things we won't get to in this morning's passage.

They must have gotten to Philippi in the middle of the week, because the text tells us that they spent some days in the city before the Sabbath came. I wonder if they spent those days looking for the man in Paul's vision? Were they hoping they would find him, or did they understand that Paul's vision wasn't really about finding a particular person?

Or perhaps seeking him is what drew them out of the city on the Sabbath to find the people who they heard were gathered by the river to pray. Maybe they expected to find him there.

They do not find him. Instead, they find a group of women praying. The text makes it seem like it was the most natural thing for Paul, Silas, and Timothy to sit down

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-acts-169-15-2>

and talk to the women they found gathered. It would not have been, since women were not highly valued. I wonder what made them stop?

Among these women is Lydia. We are told three things about Lydia: she is a worshiper of God, she is from Thyatira, she is a dealer of purple cloth, and she has a household.

Let's talk about Lydia for a moment. Her designation as a worshiper of God likely means that she is interested in, but has not converted, to Judaism. She is from Thyatira - look on your map - it is in Asia, where the Holy Spirit told the disciples not to go. I wonder how and why she got to Philippi.

Her designation as a dealer of purple cloth - which would have given her access to royalty - and mention of her household, has many commentators presuming that she was a woman of means. But making purple cloth would have taken a long time and been difficult work. The purple dye came from the mucus glands of sea snails, taking thousands of snails to make one ounce.² Combine this with Lydia being an immigrant, and some commentators are led to believe she was not actually wealthy. In reality, we don't know how successful she was. Does it matter? Does it change how she is able to receive Paul's words, and how she responds? What do our answers to these questions say about us, and who we believe is worthy to receive God's love?

But Lydia's identity does matter. It informs who she is and how she understands and responds to God and to the world around her. Those details are added by Luke for a reason, we are meant to know something about her. I wonder about her origins in Thyatira - do you notice that this town is in Asia, the place where the Holy Spirit forbid Paul to visit? I wonder if this is the Holy Spirit's way of countering any prejudice Paul and his companions might have felt about the people there?

The other thing we know about Lydia, and about God, is that "The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul" and that she and her household were baptized. There is no mention of the Holy Spirit in her conversion - which Theologian and professor Mitzi Smith points out may mean that the Holy Spirit was already at work in Lydia and her community. Smith reminds us that the Holy Spirit goes before us, moving with God's will and that "God looks upon and hears all

² https://exhibitions.kelsey.lsa.umich.edu/ancient-color/map_purple.php

people; his attention, power, and compassion are not limited to those who call themselves Israelites or Christians.”³

Catherine Holdway and Barbara Fretwell-Cooke and I attended a Christian Educators conference online this past week, and we heard over and over again how much despair and pain exists in our world, and how the greatest longing people have is for relationship and connection.

The church used to be a place where people came for that relationship and connection, and for a lot of reasons, that is no longer the case. No longer do people come to church the way they once did. And still, they long for connection to something greater than themselves, for a sense of belonging and relationship with others. We can no longer expect that people will come through the church doors, and that does not mean that the church is dying. Instead, it means God is calling us to a new thing, which is really an old thing: to go out and make disciples, to share God’s love - and meet God’s love - in unexpected places and people.

It also means creating such an atmosphere of welcome and care for one another here that we are equipped and excited to tell our neighbors about it, and trust in the work of the Holy Spirit that goes before us. It means receiving the hospitality of others and partnering in the work that God is doing in them and in us.

How do we do this? We keep serving Advent House meals, and sit with those we serve hearing about their lives. We show up “out on the town” and demonstrate what it means to be in community. We attend youth events in an act of care for youth and their families and as an example to those gathered of what Christian community looks like.

Paul followed a vision of a Macedonian man, and he followed that vision to a group of women, and to Lydia, whose heart was opened by God, who was baptized, and then responded with a hospitality that Paul and his companions could not refuse. Not only was Paul sent to an unexpected place, and an unexpected people, he was welcomed into their community, and out of this the church in Philippi was formed.

God is casting a vision, for you, and for PCO. It is a vision that is cast in this sanctuary and in the life of the congregation that draws us beyond these walls and

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-acts-169-15-3>

to peoples and places unknown and unexpected. But we must follow, trusting that the Spirit is guiding us where we should go. The world out there is hurting, despairing, in need of relationship and connection. Like Paul, we are called to sit with unexpected people, to speak the belonging that is to be found in Christ, to trust that the Holy Spirit is already at work, and receive the hospitality that is offered to us. And Like Lydia we are called out of gratitude to respond to God's word with hospitality for others. This is how the church will grow, the Church, the spirit of generosity, caring, and love that God has for all God's people - within these walls and beyond.

Let us pray.

Guiding Spirit,

You draw us in and you send us out. Help us to attend to where you are calling us to serve you in the world, and how you are asking us to be your creation, your grace, your compassion, to all those who we meet. Grant us courage to follow you and help us remember to trust that you are already at work in us and in the world.

Amen.