

“Taking Direction“

Acts 16:9-15

May 26, 2019

Today is marked with a little ‘sage on the stage’. I think we all know the story of Christ’s birth and his crucifixion. We have heard it many times over, but not so with the reading from the book of Acts that Barbara read this morning. Let me give you a little background.

The apostle Paul had been on a two-year missionary journey, previous to today’s scripture reading. He had returned to Jerusalem to attend the meetings that were to discuss who could become a follower of “the Way”. Following these meetings he decided to set out on a 2nd missionary journey from Jerusalem. His original thinking was that he was going to revisit the churches from his 1st missionary journey. Silas was traveling with Paul and some time between Derbe and Lystra, the young disciple Timothy joined them.

Paul had started out with the intent of revisiting all the churches that he had helped establish in Asia Minor, in what is now Turkey. He wanted to reassure and strengthen the churches he had helped plant on his first missionary journey.

According to the book of Acts, Paul had wanted to go to Phrygia and Galatia, also in Asia Minor, but the Holy Spirit forbade them from preaching there. So, Paul redirected to Bithynia and Mysia, but once again the Holy Spirit forbade them to stop and preach there. Instead, they turned aside once more and journeyed to Troas, which was on the shore of the Aegean Sea, a very long way from Lystra and Derbe – about 450 miles or about 725 kilometers!

While the Holy Spirit clearly said no about the plan Paul had established, we don’t hear anything about the Holy Spirit clearly giving new directions. All we know is that Paul was certain the Holy Spirit forbade him to preach or teach in his first two chosen directions, so he took a different path. It reminds me of the Robert Frost poem “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I - I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.” Paul did not follow the path he had taken before, the one he had planned to retrace. He turns from it at the Holy Spirit’s direction and sets out on a new course. And, as we shall see, it makes a significant difference.

I think that background brings us to verse 8, just before today’s reading.

Once Paul and his fellow missionaries arrive in Troas, he receives a vision giving the party, specifically Paul, clear indication to travel to Macedonia. The author of Acts doesn’t say that the vision was from the Holy Spirit, but Paul considers it powerful and trustworthy enough to immediately book passage for his entire group to Macedonia! Now, his journey is being directed to someplace, instead of merely being detoured from someplace. They sail directly to Samothrace, an island on the way to Neapolis, and once in Neapolis, they go by land straight to Philippi – a leading city of the time, a Roman colony.

At that point, you might expect something big to take place. Paul and his colleagues are where God seems to want them to be, but what we read is that they - more or less - chill out, rest, and relax, for a number of days. While they might have been preaching and teaching during that time, the person telling of their journey doesn’t say more

than a few words about that time, just that they stayed there “several days.” Here, however, is where the story gets interesting.

Remember that Paul was commissioned by Christ to take the good news to the Gentiles. In spite of this, as a starting point he always sought out the community of Jews wherever he went. While in Philippi on the Sabbath, Paul and his group go outside the city to a place by the river where they expect people to be gathering to pray. This tells us some things. First, because it is the Sabbath, Paul must have expected these people to be Jews. Second, there probably were not enough Jewish men in Philippi to form a synagogue, which required ten adult men to hold a service, or there would have been a building for gatherings to pray. Instead they went to the riverside. Third, Paul and his group were seeking out community. Fourth, they were seeking out an opportunity for prayer.

When they come across the gathering of women, Paul does not discount them and leave. Instead, he preaches and teaches, and God opens the heart of a prominent woman in the group named Lydia. She is described as “a worshiper of God,” which is Bible-language for a Jew by practice but not by birth. Lydia is so moved by what Paul shares that she is baptized, along with her household, and insists that the missionaries come stay with her.

So, let’s review. Paul wound up in Philippi because he responded to direction from the Holy Spirit and a vision from God, not because of his well-thought-out mission plan. After getting there, he waited for further direction and, when none seemed to come, he sought out a community of faith and prayer. As a result of seeking God’s direction, Lydia became the first convert in Europe and the start of the Christian church in Philippi, a church that becomes famous for its faithfulness!

How often, as we sit in committee meetings or even Annual General Meetings, do we ask the question, “What do we want to do?” or “What mission are we interested in pursuing?” or some other question that belies our need to control the mission of Christ’s church? How seldom do we approach our mission decisions with prayer instead of demographics or budgets? And when our well-laid plans don’t seem to produce results, how quick are we to get frustrated that God didn’t bring our ministry to bear fruit?

The story of Lydia’s conversion is interesting in many ways, but the power and significance of the story for us, I think, is in the reliance on God’s direction by Paul and his colleagues through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Please pray with me: Lord God, we invite you to dwell in us and to so fill us with your Holy Spirit that our ministry and mission are guided by your will and wisdom instead of ours. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.