

Where Does God Want Us to Go?

Acts 16:9-15

⁹During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰When 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. ¹¹We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹²and 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. ¹³On 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. ¹⁴A 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.

¹⁵When 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.

MINISTRY AT THE CROSSROADS

Where does God want us to go?

That was the question that Paul was asking. Paul's ministry was at a crossroads in many ways, and he needed God's direction. Several big changes in the church and in Paul's life made this so.

In what we Presbyterians might think of as the first General Assembly, the church met in Jerusalem and decided that Gentiles did not have to become Jews in order to be saved.

Paul and Barnabas were delegates at that meeting, and they spoke persuasively about what marvelous things God was doing among the Gentiles.

Their testimony swayed the assembly to accept the Gentiles into the community of faith. If this was God's work, they did not want to get in the way.

So, Paul and Barnabas heartened by this decision set off on a new missionary journey.

Unfortunately all was not smooth sailing.

SHARP DISAGREEMENT

First, Paul and Barnabas parted ways. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them on their missionary trip. But, Paul sharply disagreed. Apparently John Mark had deserted them in an earlier journey, and Paul felt that they would be better off without him.

So, Barnabas took John Mark and went to Cyprus, and Paul took a new partner, Silas, and went to Syria. Sharp disagreements among friends are always hard to handle, but this is especially true when there are sharp disagreements among friends in the church. It leaves us feeling uncertain about what we are doing and where we need to go.

And we can see this uncertainty in what happens next. As Paul, Silas and a newly acquired young disciple by the name of Timothy make their way through the region of Phrygia and Galatia their attempts to preach the gospel in Asia are (according to the Bible) blocked by the Holy Spirit.

BLOCKED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

I wonder if Paul and his fellow missionaries knew at the time that it was the Holy Spirit blocking their

attempts at ministry. I somehow doubt it. I think it was when they looked back on what happened these disciples said, “You know, I think it was the Holy Spirit that kept us from preaching in Asia.”

But, while they were on the journey I don't think it seemed that way.

Have you ever been in a church meeting when everything was going wrong? I have. When attendance is declining, giving is down and there are sharp disagreements among key leaders, I have yet to hear one person say,

“You know, I think the Holy Spirit is blocking us from doing ministry in the same old ways and in the same old places.”

No, when things start to go badly in the church we tend to blame each other and especially our leaders.

But, in the book of Acts when the church looked back on this time they saw something else in the roadblocks. They saw the work of God's Spirit. The Holy Spirit was using this time of change and disagreement to increase the ministry of the church.

Some doors were being closed in order that other doors could be opened.

The ministry of the gospel was expanding beyond the Jewish world. The grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ was wider and deeper than any had imagined. It was, in fact, a fulfillment of the ancient prophecy. The restored Kingdom would be a place where everyone, even Gentiles, would call upon the name of the Lord.

BLOCKED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT TODAY?

Most “mainline” churches these days are undergoing tremendous change. In fact some have said that the mainline churches are becoming sideline churches. According to some, we have lost so many members, money and influence that we are irrelevant. We will soon be a footnote in religious history, never to be seen or heard from again.

Sometimes it does seem that we spend all our time haggling over who to accept and who not to accept. Like Paul and Barnabas, we have sharp disagreements that cause us to go in different directions. It saps our energy and our will to do mission. Churches and presbyteries all over our denomination are cutting budgets and staff.

How should we respond to these tough times? Should we blame the extremely liberal or the extremely conservative groups in our denomination for always causing trouble and bringing up controversial issues? Should we blame our pastors for not providing the kind of preaching and leadership that we need? Should we blame the laity for not being committed enough to the mission of the church?

Been there. Tried that several times. It didn't help. In fact it has made things worse.

I wonder. Is it possible that the Holy Spirit is blocking what we are doing today so that we can learn to go in a different direction tomorrow? Is it possible that God is closing some doors in the church so that others might be opened?

THE CHURCH IN TWENTY YEARS

Several weeks ago I went to the offices of the General Assembly in Louisville, Kentucky for some continuing education. While there I had the opportunity to hear the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, Gradye Parsons speak about the future of the church.

He said, “No one knows what the church will look like in twenty years. And if they say that they do, they’re wrong.”

Now Gradye knows more about the church than anyone I’ve ever met. He has visited churches in our denomination all over the country and is an expert in the administration of the church. And yet when he tries to peer into the future it’s all cloudy.

But, he continued, “One thing I do know. Whatever God has planned for us is just fine.” Despite being unclear about where the church might go in the future, Gradye was convinced that God would lead us. God would show us where to go when the time comes.

Some might feel uncomfortable with such uncertainty about the future. Surely we should have at least a five-year plan if not a ten-year plan.

But, faith doesn’t work that way. Faith is not a destination. Faith is a journey. Following Jesus means always being willing to move, but we also need to remember that our travel plans are always subject to change.

LED TO A NEW PLACE

Such was the case with Paul and his companions. God was going to lead them to a new place, and that new place was going to be different from any place they had been before.

On their prior missionary journeys they had visited places that had least heard of God. They would begin their mission by going to the synagogue and proclaiming the word about Jesus to those who would listen.

But, God had blocked those doors. Now God was going to do a new thing. In a vision one night Paul caught a glimpse of what that new thing was going to be. Paul saw a man from Macedonia who was pleading, “Come and help us.”

Paul and his fellow missionaries didn't wait for a second vision. They were immediately convinced that God now wanted them to go to Macedonia (what is now modern day Greece), and at once they booked passage on a ship that was headed that way.

They eventually landed in a place called Philippi. Philippi is described as a leading city in Macedonia, and it is also described as a Roman colony.

The Bible tells us that they were in Philippi for several days and when the Sabbath came they decided to see if they could find some people praying down by the river outside the gates of town.

WOMEN BY THE RIVER ON THE EDGE OF TOWN

We don't know why the disciples thought there would be people praying down by the river. But, when the disciples went down to the edge of town they found some women who had gathered.

Some of you may know that Luke wrote the book of Acts. In fact some commentators suggest that Luke and Acts should be together in the Bible as a kind of two-volume set. At any rate, in Luke's writings the women are often portrayed as the ones who are devout and open to the gospel.

For us this doesn't make much of an impression. But, in a world where women were second or third class citizens at best a story of women coming to faith was quite remarkable. The women were not only on the edge of town they were also on the fringe of society as well.

Women were not traditionally given a voice or place in the life of organized religion. They were in need of good news. And maybe that is why they are more open to hearing it.

One commentator said that it was “astonishing” that “Paul the Pharisee should sit to teach a group of women.”

But, Paul has now crossed over into Macedonia. And this represents more than a change in location. Paul has changed. He disregards the Pharisaic prohibitions against talking with women about questions of faith. Instead he sits down and teaches them.

You might say that Paul once again goes where no Jew had gone before. Paul goes to edge of town, to the fringe of society, and he finds that those on the edge, those on the fringe are hungry to hear the gospel.

We will soon learn that the future of the young church lies with these people on the fringe of society.

The women by the river accept what Paul and his friends have to say. They become believers.

THE DIFFERENCE A CONVERSION CAN MAKE

And one woman in particular, a lady named Lydia believes. In fact she will soon become a leader in the church. She is described in the Bible as a “dealer in purple cloth.” In other words she was likely a successful businesswoman who may have been a person of means.

Lydia and her whole family are baptized, and she insists that Paul and his missionary friends come and stay at her house.

Look at what a difference one conversion can make. A church will be formed in Philippi, and later Paul will write a letter to that church from prison (thus our biblical book, the letter to the Philippians).

In that letter we learn of a congregation that is marked by joy and hope. When other congregations were folding under the pressure of persecution, the church at Philippi continued to support Paul and the preaching of the gospel.

In fact it would not be an exaggeration to say that we hear the gospel today because long ago Paul heeded the words of a vision, crossed over into Macedonia

and taught a group of women who were praying by the river the good news about Jesus Christ.

This was the beginning of the conversion of the European continent. This was the beginning of a civilization that would in many ways be shaped by the values of the Christian faith.

Who would have believed that such a thing was possible? Who would have thought that just one change in Paul's travel plans had the power to change the course of human history?

GOD'S "GPS"

Have you ever thought about how just one small decision can change everything? Every decision we make in life shapes the rest of our life in ways we cannot imagine.

But, this passage suggests that there is more to our life than just blind luck. The Holy Spirit is a part of the process, guiding us in the way that we should go as well as blocking us from going down a path that we shouldn't travel.

How many of you have one of those GPS things in your cars? Isn't it neat that you can plug in an

address and that nice lady in the box tells you where to turn at every intersection?

But, sometimes I don't trust that little lady in the box. Sometimes I talk back to her and say, "Where are you taking me?"

She hasn't answered back yet, but I must admit that most of the time her directions have been flawless. It's just that the route she sometimes chooses seems a bit out of the way. But, we always get to where we want to be.

God often leads us in the same way.

Don't you think Abraham and Sarah asked the question as they struck out on a journey in their old age ... going to a place that God would show them? "Where are you taking me? Why do you want me to go this way?"

Don't you think Moses and the children of Israel asked the question when they were wandering in the wilderness? "Where are you taking me? Why do you want us to go this way?"

And I'm sure Paul and his companions wondered the same thing from time to time.

And we see the same story throughout the Bible. God's leading is often like my GPS. (My wife suggested that we rename it God's Providential Service!) I'm not so sure about that name, but there is a connection. The route may be circuitous but God gets us to our destination in the end.

But, unlike my GPS there are reasons behind the circuitous routes that God often has us travel. We won't see it at the time, but when we look back on our life we may well say something like Luke wrote in the book of Acts:

“You know, we wanted to go here and there, but God's Spirit stopped us and called us to go somewhere else. And now I see why God led us in a different direction.”

WHERE DOES GOD WANT US TO GO? DISCERNING GOD'S WILL TODAY

I know that many of you here today are trying to understand what to do next in life. All our lives the spiritually sensitive person wants to know, “Where does God want us to go?” Though we can't predict where we will be in the future, this passage does

suggest some ways that we can discern God's will today.

First, God sometimes leads us by blocking us from going down certain paths. God prevents us from doing some things so that we have to go in a different direction.

What do you do when you are blocked from doing the thing you want to do?

Quite often motivational speakers tell us that we just need to try harder. We can go wherever we want to go and do whatever we want to do. Turn those stumbling blocks into stepping-stones!

I have probably said that myself a time or two. I believe in trying hard and doing our best, but as a believer I also believe in listening to the Spirit and the call of God. Sometimes we are blocked from going down a certain path in order to go down God's path.

Second, this passage teaches us that God often leads us into the unknown. Paul's trip to Macedonia was a trip into the unknown.

The people in Philippi worshipped different gods. They had different customs. I imagine Paul and his companions walking around those first few days in Philippi in awe of this hustling bustling Greco-Roman city.

They may have wondered what they could say to a people who were so different.

And yet, in the end the church at Philippi turned out to be one of the most faithful and important churches in the ancient world.

I think the lesson for us is that we shouldn't be afraid of going to meet people who are quite different from us in many ways. God has a way of using these trips into the unknown to deepen our faith.

I am reminded of the people in our Presbytery who go on short-term mission trips. Quite often these people are the most enthusiastic leaders in their church. They go back year after year to participate in these short-term mission trips. Why do these trips become so important to them?

I think that in many ways these leaders are encouraged and strengthened by God's call to cross over into a new land. They understand the grace of

God in a new way and find new Christians who welcome them into their lives and into their homes. This changes them in a way that nothing else can do.

I wonder, “Where is God calling you to cross over to meet people that are beyond your experience and comfort level?” This is where we will find the call of God.

And finally, I would say that this passage teaches us that sometimes we plan too much ... especially when it comes to the Kingdom of God.

Now don't misunderstand. I know that old saying that if we fail to plan we plan to fail. There's a certain amount of truth to that.

But, for those of us who are followers of Christ, everything on our calendar needs to be penciled in. It is always subject to God's change. In the book of James we read,

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.” Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If

the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.”
(James 4:13-15)

Someone once said, “We’ve always done it that way” are the famous last words of the church. When we elevate tradition and custom to the point that we are unable to hear the voice of God or the voice of those who need our help, we have made our own plans and desires into an idol.

In the church plans are always subject to change.

I know that this makes some of us feel quite uncomfortable. We would like to have everything planned out and nailed down.

But, that is not how God works. God reserves the right to change things up and call us to a new place.

I wonder. Where is God calling us to go? What new adventure lies ahead for us?

God help us be open to that vision of hope and change.

Amen.

