

Sermon: "A Change in Travel Plans"
5/5/13

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.

THE STORY CONTINUES

The Book of Acts often reads like travel journal. First, the Apostle Paul and his companions went here. Then they went there. Some of you probably have the missionary trips of Paul marked out on maps in the back of your Bible.

To be honest with you, when I was younger this was not my favorite part of the Bible. I used to think, "Who cares what towns the Apostle Paul visited?"

But, like many other parts of the Bible over the years I have come to appreciate the importance of these passages. The Book of Acts is more than a travel log. It is an example of how God changes things.

The Book of Acts is another one of those biblical books that doesn't really have a good ending. The travel log stops abruptly, and you want to ask, "So, what happened next?"

Here's my take on this. Luke, the meticulous author of the Book of Acts ended his account this way on purpose.

And here's what he was trying to say. The Acts of the Apostles didn't end with the work of those who served the early church.

The Book of Acts is not just an ancient travel log. It's not just about Paul and where he decided to go. It's not just about how the Holy Spirit led men and women in the early church to do God's will.

It's also about how God's Spirit still leads people today. The Acts of the Apostles is a story that continues.

And our story is connected with their story. God is still at work in the world. And God is still calling us to listen to for the still small voice of the Spirit at every turn.

A CHANGE IN TRAVEL PLANS

Our gospel lesson for today is from John, the 14th chapter. It is Jesus' farewell address, and he tells the disciples that though he will soon leave them, he will not leave them alone. He will not leave them as orphans. The Holy Spirit will be their comfort and their guide as they go into the world to proclaim the gospel.

In today's lesson we get a concrete example of how that works. Paul has been authorized by the church in Jerusalem to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. But, everywhere he goes things just don't work out.

Luke, the author of Acts who seems to be traveling with Paul on this journey, tells us that the Holy Spirit blocked their ministry. They weren't allowed to preach in the region of Phrygia and Galatia. And then the Holy Spirit forbade them to speak the word in Asia or the region of Bithynia.

So Paul and his companions had a change in travel plans. They passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.

I think its important for us to understand that sometimes God changes our travel plans. Even when want to do something good, sometimes God closes a door. Sometimes the Spirit blocks us from going in a certain direction.

God tells us "no" to one thing so that we can say, "yes" to something else.

Many other stories in the Bible teach this same lesson.

For example, think about Abraham. God called Abraham in his old age to go to the place that God would show him. And for the rest of his life Abraham was a nomad, traveling from place to place in search of God's will.

Abraham is described in the Bible as the prototype of what it means to be faithful, a person who trusts God. But, there were times when Abraham's faith wavered. Abraham wondered why in the world God was leading him around in circles in the wilderness. Abraham wondered if God would ever make good his promise to bless him with a child in his old age.

But, when Abraham and Abraham's descendants looked back on his life they saw the hand of God. Abraham was always in the Promised Land, and God's Spirit was always with him.

Columba, a priest in sixth-century Ireland got in a boat and let the Providence of God take him where he was meant to be. He made landfall once but decided to push out again because he could still see his homeland on the horizon behind him.

The second place he landed was Iona, the island where Christianity touched Scotland for the first time.

Columba's approach was extreme, but it does symbolize how God sometimes works. Sometimes we have to just push our rudderless boat into the water and trust our lives to the Providence of God.

Do you find yourself struggling in some area of your life? Are doors closing? Do opportunities seem scarce?

Maybe God is saying "no" so that God can lead you in another direction.

Christians do not believe that life is just one thing after another. Christians believe that our lives have a purpose, God's purpose. It's not all up to us. God leads us. And God is with us every step of the way.

And sometimes the call of God comes when the Spirit blocks us from going in a certain direction. That's how it happened with Paul.

PHILIPPI

But, in Troas Paul has a vision. And in that vision Paul sees a man from Macedonia (modern day Greece). And the man in the vision pleads with Paul saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

After being blocked from doing ministry in several places, Paul and his companions do not hesitate to go in this new direction. Luke tells us that after Paul's vision "immediately" they tried to cross over into Macedonia, convinced that God had called them to proclaim the good news in that area.

They are able to book passage to Macedonia, and they eventually make their way to a place called Philippi.

Philippi was a Roman colony, and it was one of the more important cities in the area. Philippi was that place where the Empire was powerful and popular. This was a place that lived like an extended section of Rome itself. Philippi was an example of what Rome offered the world.

And so Philippi was very different from many of the other places that Paul and his companions had visited. It was a very secular place.

I think there was reason God led Paul to Philippi.

God was going to build a community of faith that would say "no" to the ways of imperial power. God was going to raise up a community that would offer a different way of life, a different story and a different promise.

In many of the other cities that Paul visited at least he had a place to start. He would begin his ministry in the synagogues where people had at least heard of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

But, Philippi had no synagogue. So, where would Paul begin his ministry?

Luke writes, “We remained in this city for some days.”

I wonder if this means that for a while at least Paul and his friends were not quite sure what to do.

Maybe they even began to wonder if God had really called them to this place, a place that was so different from the world that they knew.

The leading of God’s Spirit began with roadblocks, and now there is uncertainty.

Where can we go?

Who can we talk to?

HEARTS OPENED BY THE RIVER

They finally decide to go outside the gate down by the river on the Sabbath. They hope that in this place they might find a place of prayer.

And they do.

Women had gathered by the river to pray, and the disciples begin to talk to them about the gospel. And one of the women by the name of Lydia is particularly interested in what the disciples have to say.

Lydia is described as worshipper of God and a seller of purple cloth from the town of Thyatira.

(By the way, Thyatira was located in that part of Asia where Paul and his companions first wanted to go and preach but the Spirit prevented them. But, now in Macedonia their first convert is a person from that part of the world! It’s funny how these things work out.)

Lydia is a successful businesswoman.

(Purple dye was rare and expensive. That’s why royalty preferred the color. So Lydia’s clients were wealthy and that in turn made her a woman of means.)

Lydia also seemed to be a person who worshipped the God proclaimed by the Jews.

There were some in the ancient world who appreciated and worshipped the God proclaimed by the Hebrews but they did not take the formal step of becoming a part of that religion.

But, when Lydia heard the gospel as proclaimed by Paul, the Scripture tells us “the Lord opened her heart.” Lydia went from being a worshipper of God to being a disciple of Jesus.

Paul practically disappears from the story at this point.

This is not a story about the charismatic personality of a preacher who has the power to create faith.

This is the story of God's amazing grace. From beginning to end our text for today stresses that God is in charge of this mission trip. God sets the direction. God determines the results.

So, due to God's grace alone, Lydia and her whole family believed and were baptized.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF FAITH

And immediately upon being baptized Lydia wanted to do something. She "prevailed" upon the disciples to come to her house and accept her hospitality.

Someone in our Bible study asked, "What does it mean that she prevailed upon them to accept her hospitality?" I said I thought it meant that she insisted that they come to her house and accept her hospitality.

But, that got me thinking. That phrase seemed familiar. And it was. There's one other place in the Bible that this word is used. Do you know where it is?

It's Easter evening on the road to Emmaus. The two disciples on that road have not recognized the stranger who travels with them. But, this stranger has explained the Scripture to them in a way reminiscent of Jesus.

And so they prevail upon this incognito Jesus to stay with them at nightfall. They offer hospitality to the Jesus. They insist that Jesus stay with them.

Maybe this echo is not accidental. By lives transformed and by faithful discipleship, the fellowship of the risen Lord continues to extend into the world.

We are nearing the end of the Easter season. But, we are reminded that the Spirit of the risen Lord continues to welcome people into the kingdom. God welcomes us into his home, and we in turn welcome others in the name of Jesus.

THE REST OF THE STORY

Lydia opens her heart and her home to the gospel. And this is the beginning of what will become a great church.

Later Paul will write a letter to this church while he is in prison. And in this letter to the Philippians we learn of a thriving congregation whose life is marked by joy and hope. While other churches had succumbed to persecution and heresy the church at Philippi stood strong, continuing 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?

When we are open to the leading of God's Spirit amazing things can still happen through the power of God's sovereign grace.

WHERE DO WE GET OUR GUIDANCE?

This past week I traveled to North Carolina and I used the map program on my phone to guide me. The program suggested a route that was not familiar to me, but I decided to give it a try anyway.

All was well so long as the nice lady on the machine told me which way to turn. But, then I came to Bennettsville, SC, the land of very few cell towers. The program blinked and flashed some psychedelic colors on the screen.

Then it quit working altogether. I turned my phone off, turned it back on and reloaded the program. Once again the screen flashed and then I received a message, "You have arrived!"

No, I hadn't. I was still in Bennettsville. I didn't want to be in Bennettsville. And I had no map, and I did not know where to turn.

So, I turned to a source that was more reliable. I called my sister, and she guided me out of the wilderness into the Promised Land of North Carolina.

I think that we often trust the wrong source when it comes to guidance for our lives. And when we find ourselves in the wilderness, we don't know where to turn or what to do next.

But, today's lesson suggests that we are never alone. God's Spirit is with us every step of the way.

And quite often that Spirit leads down some surprising and yet very fruitful paths. We can't see it while we're making the journey, but when we look back on our lives it is plain to see.

God's amazing grace never abandons us. His Spirit is our trusted source of guidance and hope. The Spirit blocks our way and leads our way. The Spirit opens our hearts to the power of God's grace and salvation. The Spirit leads us home.

TIME NOT WASTED

One of the nice things about going back to a former church to preach is that you get to see how God has worked through your ministry. Many people reminded me of the things we had done together, and quite a few thanked me for acts of ministry that, through the power of God's Spirit had changed lives.

At the time I didn't know that what I did and what I said made a difference. In fact sometimes I was quite discouraged by what seemed like an out of the way, insignificant ministry.

I'll never forget the discouraging words of one minister who interviewed me before I went to that church. He said, "That church is going to fold. I'm not sure what you're going to do there, but good luck."

I as a young minister was shell-shocked by what he had to say. I wondered, "Am I really wasting my time going to this church?"

Now I know what I should have said to that naysaying minister. I should have said,

"We don't believe in luck. We believe in Providence. We believe that God's Spirit goes with us every step of the way.

All ministry is significant because the Spirit of God in Christ still changes hearts. It's not what I do that will make a difference. It's what God chooses to do through me."

Long ago Paul preached the gospel to a woman by the river, and the world changed. And I believe that when we preach the gospel, when we tell others about God's grace and forgiveness, people still change, and the world still becomes a different place.

God give us the faith to go where the Spirit leads us.

Amen.