

**Where Next?**

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Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

**Acts 16:9-15**

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.

**SPIRITUAL NAVIGATION**

Ask my wife. She'll tell you.

I'm directionally challenged. (That means I get lost easy.)

Just ask her. She has many amusing stories to tell.

And that's why I love the latest gadget in my car, on screen navigation.

Just type in the address of the place you want to go, and you get detailed information about where to turn next. Not only that but a chime sounds, there's even an arrow on the screen pointing the way and a soft woman's voice says, "At the intersection, turn right."

It's great.  
It's just what I need.

Wouldn't it be nice if could get such clear directions when it comes to spiritual guidance? Unfortunately, my spiritual navigation is not so clear.

Where does God want me to go?  
I'm not always sure.  
There is no voice with pointing arrows and chimes to get my attention.

I do know some folks that seem to be better connected than me.  
They make statements like,

"God told me to do this.  
God told me to go there.  
God told me to say this."

In a way I feel jealous.  
Their spiritual navigation seems to be just about as good as the onscreen navigation in my car.

But, I'm also skeptical.  
I want to ask them,

"How can you be so sure?  
How do you know that God has called you to do this?  
How do you know that God wants you to go there?"

Did he speak to you?  
Did you have a vision?  
How do you know that God wants this for you?

Is it possible that you're just putting the words in God's mouth that you want to hear?"

I've never asked anyone those questions.  
Maybe I'm afraid to expose my own insecurity about spiritual matters.  
Maybe I don't want to tear someone else's sense of faith.  
After all, who am I to judge?

But, I suspect that most of you are like me.  
Your spiritual navigation is not that good.  
You ask, "Where do you want me to go next Lord?"  
But, the reply does not always come through loud and clear.

For most of us, it's a struggle to know where to go next.

## BETTER SPIRITUAL NAVIGATION

Often, people in the Bible seem to have better spiritual navigation than we do.

In fact, many of them really do hear directly from God.

For example, last week we read the story of Peter's vision.

He not only saw a vision from heaven;  
he immediately got clarification about what that vision meant.  
He was to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

And that message was confirmed by what happened.  
The Gentiles believed and the Holy Spirit transformed their lives.

In today's lesson Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia.  
He's pleading with Paul saying, "Come over here and help us."

The next day Paul discussed this vision with his traveling companions and they had no doubt. They were convinced that this was the call of God.

And immediately they changed their travel plans.  
They set sail for Macedonia.

When you read some stories in the Bible, it seems like those folks didn't have to struggle with God's will the way we do. They had a clear vision of where God wanted them to go, and they went.

## SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE

But, there are other stories in the Bible that suggest the path was neither straight nor easy.

For example, take our lesson for today.

How did Paul arrive at this crossroads in his life?  
It was a long and winding path.

It began on the road to Damascus.  
He was blinded by the light of the risen Christ and transformed from persecutor to evangelist.

But, that transformation was not quick or easy.  
Paul had to learn a new way of living.  
He had to experience the grace of God before he could preach it.

Paul's first attempts to preach the gospel to the Jews was a total failure.  
If it were not for the intervention of church members, Paul's ministry would have ended before it even got started.

For the time being, Peter was recognized as the leader of the church.  
As we learned last week, he was called by God to preach the message not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles.

This was not readily accepted by the early church.

Last week we read that the Jews in Jerusalem criticized Peter for eating with Gentiles. However, when they learned the whole story and learned that the new Gentile converts received the Holy Spirit, they were awestruck and praised God.

End of story. Right?  
Not exactly.

Not everyone accepted Gentiles into the church.  
This continued to be an area of uncertainty and conflict.

There was (as Paul would later put it) a dividing wall of conflict between Jews and Gentiles.  
And as we know even today, walls do not come down easily.

## THE FIRST CHURCH WIDE MEETING

But, despite the reluctance of the early church to receive Gentiles into the faith, more and more Gentiles accepted the gospel and received the Spirit.

In particular, Paul and Barnabas preached to the Gentiles in Antioch. And Their efforts were extremely successful.

But, some other folks came to Antioch and said,  
“Unless you become a Jew first, you cannot receive the gospel and be saved.”

Luke is a master of understatement in what he wrote next,  
“Paul and Barnabas had no small discussion and debate with them ...”  
No small discussion indeed ...

This became such a hot topic that they called the first church wide meeting to figure this out. Should Gentiles be required to become Jews in order to be saved?

That was the burning question in the early church.

Peter, Paul and Barnabas testified at this meeting.  
They told about all the Gentiles who had received the Spirit and said,

“If God is doing this, do we really want to get in God’s way?  
Why do you want to add an extra requirement?  
These people already seem to be followers of Jesus.”

The arguments of Peter and Paul won the day, but this issue will come back again and again.

God made His will crystal clear on this matter, but some had a spiritual GPS that was not working properly. They couldn’t hear the call of God on this matter clearly.

Tradition and history often got in the way.

## INTO GENTILE COUNTRY

But, Paul and his companions had no such trouble.  
They heard the call of the Spirit, and they were heading straight for Gentile country.

In particular they landed in a place called Philippi.

According to the Bible Philippi was the leading city in the area and a Roman colony.

“If you could make it there, you could make it anywhere.”

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

I wonder about those days they spent in the city.

Were they overwhelmed by this strange new place dominated by Greek and Roman culture?

They weren't in Kansas (or in this case Jerusalem) any more!

Usually the apostles would go to the synagogues first and preach the gospel.

But, there were no synagogues in Philippi.

Where could they go?

Where should they go?

For some reason the apostles thought that there might be a place of prayer down by the river outside the gates of the city.

So the apostles went down to that place.

And they found some women who had gathered in that place.

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 is radically open to the call of God

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.

## THE FUTURE IN A FOREIGN LAND

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.

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.” Purple dye was particularly rare and was favored by the wealthy. So it is likely that Lydia a successful businesswoman who was 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 one of the reasons we hear the gospel today is because long ago Paul heeded the words of a vision.

He 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?

## PROVIDENCE

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.

We often don't know that we are being led by God's Spirit at the time. In fact often we complain and suggest that God is absent.

Where are you taking me Lord?  
Are you sure this is the way?

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.

Moses and the children of Israel asked the question when they were wandering in the wilderness.

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

And I know that we ask that question.  
When the way is dark and uncertain we want to know,  
"Where next?"

We won't see it right now, 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."

Our lives have a purpose.  
God has a plan for our lives.

So why don't we see that plan?  
What keeps us from hearing God's voice?

## OVERCOMING THE POWER OF TRADITION

Sometimes culture and tradition keep up us from hearing God's call.

In the early church, it was hard for some to imagine welcoming Gentiles, foreigners into the family of faith. But, that's exactly what happened.

Indeed the missionaries of the early church were charged to cross boundaries and go in directions that they might not have gone.

The people in Philippi worshiped 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.

## CUBA

I am reminded of the people in our Presbytery who go on short-term mission trips to Cuba.

A couple of those folks are in our congregation today.  
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 us to cross over and meet people that are beyond your experience and comfort level?"

This is often where we will find the call of God.

## EUGENE PETERSON AND BONO

I saw a wonderful example of this in a video that I watched this past week produced by Fuller Seminary in California. The video was entitled Eugene Peterson and Bono.

Eugene Peterson is the person who gave us a new translation of the Bible. He entitled it "The Message."

Bono is the lead singer in the rock band U2.

Bono heard about Peterson first.

In a 2002 edition of the Rolling Stone he mentioned that he was reading Peterson's translation of the New Testament and that it had an influence on his music.

Peterson was teaching at a seminary at the time, and his students brought a copy of the magazine into his classroom. They were excited that their professor had been mentioned by Bono.

Peterson was not so impressed.

He asked, "Who's Bono?"

And what is the "Rolling Stone?"

With a wry smile Peterson said, "Bono and I traveled in different circles at that time."

Fast forward to 2005.

Peterson had just published his translation of the Psalms.

And Bono loved it. In fact he even based a song on Peterson's translation of Psalm 40.

He invited Peterson to one of his concerts, but Peterson declined. He was translating the rest of the Old Testament, and he had deadlines. Once again his students were incredulous.

Bono invited you to a concert, and you declined?!  
How could you do that?  
Peterson just shrugged and smiled.

Finally, in 2007 Bono invited Peterson to another concert in Dallas. And Peterson accepted the invitation. The elderly minister/scholar and the rock star made an unlikely pair.

But, they hit it off.  
Peterson said, "It was very natural.  
Two believers talking together."

Peterson was impressed with Bono's music, but found the "mash pit" a bit curious. The interviewer corrected him, "That's mash pit." Peterson smiled.

The video concludes with Bono coming to visit Peterson in his beautiful home in Montana. Peterson's wife bakes cookies, and they welcome the rock star Bono like a long lost son.

But, the conversation between the rocker and the old minister is quite engaging. They talk about the reality of evil and how some versions of Christianity gloss over that fact.

Bono referred to it as "hairy fairy" faith. It was unrealistic. But, Peterson's translation of the Psalms did not gloss over the evil and the struggle. It made the faith real to this rocker.

Peterson noted that the reality of evil also played a prominent role in the New Testament. He said that he had a cross in every room of his house, not as a decoration, but as a reminder that evil is real. And that the reality of evil stands at the heart of the Christian faith.

I thought this video was a good example of how the call of God in Christ still transcends borders.

Sometimes it means that we literally go to another land.

But, sometimes it means that we dare to connect with someone whose background and experience is quite different from ours.

Even a rocker and an elderly minister can make music together and share a common faith.

It doesn't matter that we run in different circles and have different customs. The Spirit inspired gospel can still bring us together.

There are people who need to hear the gospel in Macedonia ... and in other places.

Our job is to go and see what happens.

We might be surprised at who is willing to listen!

Amen.