

Life doesn't always go the way we planned. Events don't turn out the way we expect. And sometimes the choices we have to make can seem overwhelming. How do we respond?

Today I'd like to look for guidance at our reading from Acts. During the Easter season every year, our Old Testament lesson is replaced by a reading from Acts. These past weeks we've been hearing a number of different accounts from Acts.

Today, in Acts chapter 16, we hear of something very simple, seemingly small, and yet of great importance.

At this point in Acts, St. Paul is in the middle of his 2nd great missionary journey. He has revisited a number of churches that he founded on his 1st missionary journey in the region we would call south-eastern Turkey. He then tries to head to south-western Turkey to plant other churches. This area will later become a hugely important area in Christian history. But at this point, Paul runs into various road blocks and doesn't make it to this region. Later in Acts, he will arrive there, but for now he is prevented in various ways.

St. Luke, the author of Acts, doesn't tell us what these road blocks are. But he does indicate where they are from. In the verses right before our reading, Luke says that Paul and his companions had somehow been "forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word"¹ in the area. They tried to go to another nearby area but were prevented again, this time Luke says, "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them."²

What the spiritual road blocks are, we don't know. But somehow as Paul and his companions are travelling and spreading the Good News, they're perceiving God is closing certain doors for them.

Which brings us to our lesson today. We're told in the first verse of our lesson today that Paul has a vision. He sees "a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'"³

And the translation, "pleading," may not be strong enough. Begging. Imploring. Beseeching. "Come over to Macedonia and help us." At that point Paul is 150 miles away across the Aegean Sea from Macedonia, what we would call north-eastern Greece.

Remember Paul and his companions have been encountering spiritual road blocks. But now Paul has vision of a man from across the sea begging Paul to come to them. Paul discusses it with his companions and fellow workers, Silas and Timothy. And they decide that God is calling them to go to Macedonia to proclaim the Good News there.

A couple of wonderful things here.

¹ Acts 16:6

² Acts 16:7

³ Acts 16:9

First, is the wonderful example of Paul, Silas, and Timothy being sensitive to the spiritual signals they're being given. They don't try to charge through doors that are being closed to them. But they also are ready to travel through a completely unexpected door that opens to them.

This wasn't the original game plan. They were planning to stay in Turkey. But they perceive that God is calling them to travel to Greece. And they are obedient to that call.

Second, it's at this point that we have a shift in pronouns. For 16 chapters, the book of Acts has been narrated in the third person--he did this, they did that.

But now it switches to first person plural: "When (Paul) 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."⁴

This is the first of several of the so-called "we passages" in Acts. And not only do the pronouns shift from they to we. The narrative also begins to be much more detailed in describing the travel. It'd be like saying, "They went from New York to St. Louis to Amarillo. Then we travelled south on I-27, stopping off in Canyon, then going to Happy, then we had dinner Plainview. We spent the night in Hale Center, and then finally went to Lubbock the next day."

The combination of first person pronouns in these "we passages" coupled with the extra detail leads most scholars to conclude that it is at this point that Luke himself has joined Paul's entourage. Thus he is adding his own eyewitness remembrances to these portions of Paul's journeys.

And this is an important reminder to us as well. God's mission doesn't just belong to Paul. It takes a bigger group to carry on God's work. In this case the trip to Macedonia involves Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke. In the same way, these we passages remind us that we are not involved in doing God's work as Lone Rangers. We are called to do it together. And we're called to be in discernment together. What is our mission? How might it be changing? Is God calling us to do something new? Is God calling us to involve others as fellow workers in this mission, which is really His mission?

So Luke tells us in a great amount of detail that we'll skip over about their trip from Troas, near the old ruins of Troy, to Philippi. Luke describes Philippi as the "leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony."

These colonies were Roman enclaves scattered throughout their empire. They were ways that Rome tried to project its power and its culture in the far-flung corners of their empire. The colonies were supposed to be examples to the locals: this is what being part of the Roman Empire has to offer you.

⁴ Acts 16:10

And Paul goes there to offer a vision of a different kind of empire--God's Empire, God's Kingdom.

The other significant thing here is that for the first time, the Gospel has been taken to the continent of Europe. Our Episcopalian tradition comes from Western Christianity, European Christianity. So this is a hugely important moment for us. If Paul had stayed in Turkey and not crossed the Aegean to Europe, our history might have been quite different.

Paul and his companions paying attention to small spiritual signals and visions means that the Gospel is taken to a whole new continent for the first time.

And there, on that new continent he baptizes the first European convert to Christianity. Her name is Lydia. She is a merchant, a businesswoman, which is a fairly unusual for a woman in that patriarchal culture. She is a dealer in purple cloth. It's likely that she was a widow.

Luke tells us that, "The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul." God was acting in Paul and Timothy and Silas and Luke's lives to get them to Philippi in the first place. And God is also acting in Lydia's life, prompting her to be open to hear the Good News that Paul was proclaiming.

In other words, God is in charge of this mission. God sends those who will proclaim. God helps prepare those who will receive the Good News. From beginning to end, this is God's work, God's mission, not any human being's mission.

But it does involve humans being cooperative with God's mission, from Paul on down the chain to Lydia. And Lydia plays her part. She is baptized. Then she invites her household to be baptized as well. This may have involved children, as well as household slaves, along with those who were engaged working for her in her business.

And then Lydia makes God's mission her business. She invites Paul and his companions to stay in her house. It's an indication of her wealth and status that she has sufficient room to house them along with everyone else. And Luke uses strong language. He says "she prevailed upon us" to be her guests. The word prevailed runs right up to the edge of saying she insisted, or even forced them to stay with her. Lydia is going to support God's mission in Philippi, and she isn't going to take no for an answer.

And don't miss the subtle, yet delicious irony here. Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia begging for them to come minister in his land. And yet when Paul gets there, the first major convert is a woman.

In our 21st century culture, we might say, "So what?" But in Paul's culture, in Paul's Jewish upbringing, women were never regarded as being important enough to even waste one's time trying to instruct them. The famous quote by the Jewish Rabbi Eliezer was, "Let the words of the law be burned, rather than that they should be delivered to women."⁵

⁵ Rabbi Eliezer, *Bamidbar Rabba*, sec. 9, fol. 204

And yet, the Good News of Jesus Christ is delivered to women in Philippi. They not only accept it. They become a strong part of the early church in Philippi.

We may have life planned and mapped out. And yet God has greater things in mind than we do. Not only can God imagine things that we cannot. Amazingly, God invites us to be a part of it.

As St. Augustine famously said, "Without God, we cannot. Without us, God will not."⁶

Paul and his companions could have been frustrated or disheartened by doors being closed and road blocks being erected.

They could have ignored or be overwhelmed by the prospect of travelling to a new continent, to new territory to proclaim the Gospel.

But they respond with faithfulness. They do what they can with what they've been given. They get on the boat and head for Philippi.

Lydia could have said, "It's a man's world and as woman with a business I have to be careful who I associate with."

But she responds to Paul's message openly and with faithfulness. Then she uses her gifts and resources to further God's mission.

We have a role to play in making the world a better place. We have talents and gifts and resources. And God calls us to use them to build his kingdom.

How will you respond to God's promptings?
How will you further God's mission?

⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *169th Sermon*