

Nudged Along the Path
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Acts 16: 6-15

When I was perhaps twelve or thirteen and still learning about how prayer works—come to think of it, I’m even now still learning about how prayer works—but when I was twelve or thirteen, I would lie awake in my bed at night and wonder, what am I to do in life? What am I to be? Where am I to go? I don’t have any notion what I’m preparing for.

And so, I would pray, sometimes out loud, “God, just tell me what to do, and I will do it.” And listening intently in the night, this is what I heard... (long silence). No voice. No visitation. No clear direction. Now, I don’t think I was being foolish. I had studied Bible stories and listened to sermons, so I knew the experiences that scripture shares of Moses: God called out to him from a burning bush. Called him by name! And told him exactly what to do.

I knew of Mary, who was perhaps not that far from my tender age at the time of her experience, visited by an angel and given the holiest and hardest of callings: Greetings, favored one, do not be afraid. Favored one—I wouldn’t have minded the sound of that.

I knew of the boy Samuel, lying awake in the temple—here’s a direct Biblical precedent for God speaking to insomniac teenagers out of the darkness—and again, God called him by name: Samuel! Samuel! And gave to him a task.

So, I don’t think I was so terribly out of line in thinking I might receive a little direction, clarification, a purpose, and some grand and God-directed calling. I learned in geometry that from three connected points you can extrapolate a straight line, so based on Biblical examples of call like those just mentioned and more, I thought that God dealt in straight lines and clarion calls and clear, concise directions.

I just hadn’t read Acts yet. “The Acts of the Apostles”—it even sounds purposeful and planned and precise. But reading it, I wonder if it might not have been named the Accidents of the Apostles, because it often seems

that there is more impulse and trial and error, and scribbles and mumbles instead of straight lines and clarion calls.

Take our scripture lesson for this morning: Paul is on his second missionary journey, travelling with Silas through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, in modern day Turkey. They are trying to plant churches, good and holy work. But the scripture tells us that they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. Now this is not a good-news blackout for the entire continent of Asia—rather “Asia” here in the text means the Roman province of Asia, located in Asia minor, of which Phrygia is a part.

And forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word...well, I just take that to mean, they're on a missionary journey, trying to spread the word, but they just can't get any traction at all. This contact falls through, that interaction fails—it's like they're going door to door like those folks who come through your neighborhood trying to line up estimates for lawn care or home repair services, and all they're getting is no sale, no sale, no thank you, closed door, dead end. Maybe the local authorities keep telling them to move along. There comes a time when you recognize, maybe I'm not working the right neighborhood or following the right leads. To put it in Biblical or Spiritual language—maybe this isn't where the Spirit wants me—maybe this isn't where I'm called to be.

So then, they move on—wasn't working out to the east, so they move Northward, perhaps thinking they'll try out church planting and fishing for people along the coast of the Black Sea. They attempted to go into Bithynia, our scripture relates, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; and again, I think this is not so much like Gandalf blocking the bridge in the Lord of the Rings movie—but the frustrating encounter of more obstacles or resistance to their work.

Paul and Silas, in their travels, are dependent upon the doors that open to them: the hospitality of strangers, the people they meet who can introduce them to other people, seeking some critical mass from which a fledgling congregation can be established. They can't remain in one place for too long. They next think “Perhaps we'll make our way into Bithynia,” but without long-term lodging or contacts or food—well, you look for the next open door.

So, having gone Eastward and gained no traction, and having pressed northward without much luck, they make their way over to the Aegean Coast and Troas, and there, finally, during the night Paul has a vision—an inner impulse, a leading or a leaning to cross over to Macedonia. In the vision, a Macedonian man pleads with Paul, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” And on that impulse, Paul and Silas do a new thing.

Now just a couple of interesting points here, to me. Paul and Silas have now accomplished pretty much a geographic 180, and the language of the telling—*forbidden by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them*—tells me that the journey has not gone according to their original plan, or even their plan B, or C. It’s as though the Spirit has now said, “Do the opposite of what you set out to do, or go in the opposite direction of where you set out to go”—which brings to mind the old saying, “Tell God your plans, so God can laugh.”

So, on the strength of a vague direction, an impulse in the night and not much more, they set sail for Neapolis and then Philippi, where they remain for some days, attempting to establish a base.

The second thing that interests me is that, at least as we are told it, Paul never encounters the mysterious man from Macedonia encountered in his vision. “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Instead, Paul and Silas encounter a remarkable woman who helps them. After all the wandering, all the wondering, all the loose threads and dead ends...it is Lydia, acting as God’s agent, who at last gives traction to the journey. Let’s recall the story:

Paul and Silas remain some days in Philippi, awaiting the sabbath day, presumably so they can discover who the devout Jews in the city are and make contact and receive aid. But their contact isn’t in the city, or even of the city, and it isn’t a Macedonian man. They go outside the gate of the city, by the river and they encounter and speak with a group of women, and among them is Lydia, a woman from Thyatira, and a dealer in purple cloth. I love this story in light of people who like to say (erroneously) that Paul taught women to be obedient and subservient and called men to be leaders in the home and in the church. Here we see his direct experience that the “best Macedonian man for the job” is a woman.

Now maybe this means nothing but I just find it interesting: if you want to guess where Thyatira (Lydia's home) is, it's right in the midst of the province of Asia, where the Spirit earlier set up the road blocks, but it's now an Asian woman in Macedonia who bears the first real fruit along the journey.

As a dealer in purple cloth, Lydia is a seller of a textile that is considered extravagant and is affordable only to the wealthy. And as a seller of purple cloth, Lydia must first be a buyer or manufacturer of purple cloth. Lydia is therefore a businesswoman of no insignificant stature—presumably with the connections, the contacts, the resources that Paul and Silas need, but she is also a woman of devout heart and faithful sensibilities—a worshipper of God. Lydia and her household are baptized, a foothold for the gospel is established in Macedonia, she prevails upon them to make her home their home base and thus enables their mission, and the spread of the church into Europe is facilitated.

So, let's recap—instead of a straight line, the journey goes in a virtually opposite direction. Instead of instant clarity, it is obstacle, obstacle, frustration—it at last moves in an unexpected direction inspired by a somewhat vague vision of a Macedonian Man; Paul and Silas end up in Philippi, instead meet a woman from the place where they were trying to start out their work in the first place, and she has just the network to open a whole new mission field for the gospel. The Lord works, as they say, in the most mysterious of ways.

Now, a couple of thoughts as we seek to draw meaning from the scripture for our lives and perhaps our church. The first observation is that we type-A, capital-A Americans like to deal in plans and objectives and carefully crafted initiatives and sure bets. We prefer carefully managed portfolios to daily manna or unexpected loaves and fishes. We want a roadmap for our industry, or for our ministry. A balanced budget, a strategic plan. We want God to bless our endeavors, perhaps at the expense of discerning what God actually is bumping and nudging us to do.

Sometimes, we get it just so, and the spirit moves mightily. But far more characteristic, it seems to me, is the circuitous journey of fits and starts, of obstacles, wrong turns, and dead ends; the ongoing activity of failing forward and falling upward that bears eventual and unexpected fruit. Ministry is about trying, and praying, and trying again, and praying some

more, about not having enough and then discovering enough, and often it is about encountering as much frustration as success. That's important for us to realize when we are tempted to look wistfully back upon the earlier successes or the glory days of the church in our culture—it isn't as though God no longer guides the journey.

And when an opportunity comes along—when we have been bumping up against consistent obstructions, when we undertake endeavors that “the Spirit does not allow,” sometimes we must be willing to go where the Spirit flows, to set down our plan and do a new thing.

Sometimes, as well, our help comes from an unexpected quarter—the conversation we hadn't planned to have, the encounter that wasn't in our Day-Timer. We have our own unanticipated encounter with a present-day Lydia.

It is a reminder, a humbling reminder, that we are about God's work and not our own, that we are not called to achieve success, we are called to faithfulness; that sometimes when it feels that God is getting in our way and we are pushing a rope up the stairs (the Holy Spirit forbade it, the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them) it is actually we who are getting in God's way, or at least getting in our own way.

And it is reminder that you might have to try ten dead-end things before you discover the one that opens new opportunities and changes the world in ways large, or more often, small.

Lastly, from a church mission and ministry perspective, Paul and Silas certainly didn't pitch a tent in Phrygia and wait for the world to come to them—they did not let the moss grow beneath their feet. Ministry is always on the move, and out there, and going in new directions, instead of camping in our familiar routines. The church is not just a provider of programs to which people come, it is a mission to which people are called, serving a kingdom that has not yet fully come--we often forget that.

And on an individual basis, our passage is also a helpful reminder. We who work so hard at trying to be faithful, to do the right thing, to make the right plan for our lives, to find the good and holy work to which God is calling us: it is well for us to remember that we follow a God who is often a God of bumps and nudges, of small encouragements and Spirit-filled “chance

encounters.” A God of small insights and unexpected new directions. A God who does not always speak when we ask, or act as we expect. Life is a sometimes-circuitous journey—as I think back across my own life, it has hardly been the clear direction or the straight path that I envisioned as a twelve-year-old in the night. It’s been more like one of those old Family Circus cartoons by Bill Keane—where Billy takes a journey of three miles to make the hundred-yard walk from the bus stop—it has been full of twists and turns, and stumbles and surprises, and unexpected gifts and joys, and hurts and hardships and fresh discoveries of God all along the way. Tell God your plans so God can laugh—then open your plans to God, so you can rejoice.

Amen