

FOLLOW THE VISION

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Acts 16:9-15

The Book of Acts is the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. It picks up with Jesus' final instructions to his disciples and his Ascension into heaven. Shortly after that Ascension, on the day of Pentecost, the disciples experience the coming of the Holy Spirit over them and they are changed. A great crowd is attracted by all the ruckus—the fire and noise and the wind. And Peter steps out into the midst of the crowd, and he begins to preach telling the people about Jesus of Nazareth. He begins his sermon by quoting the Old Testament prophet Joel with these words:

“In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Joel's prophecy is itself a vision of a new day, the day when God will pour out the Holy Spirit on all people. The Spirit won't be coming to just a few. No. It will touch every man and woman and child because every person shall know of God. And on that day, people will prophecy, they will see visions, they will dream dreams. Sons and daughters, men and women, slaves and free, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. On that day, the power of the Holy Spirit will wash over each person, and everyone will be changed. This is the day that the Kingdom will embrace the world.

Visions are powerful. They are life changing. Assuming that we heed them.

Our reading for today is driven by a vision experienced by the Apostle Paul. Paul, as you know, was the most committed and successful evangelist in the Bible—other than Jesus himself.

For the first part of his life, Paul was a zealous Jew. He spent years persecuting anyone, especially Jews who were following Jesus. But then, in what we call the Damascus Road experience, Paul had a vision of Jesus speaking to him. He was struck blind. As his sight returned, he began to view his life differently, and he committed himself to becoming a follower of Christ, just like those he had persecuted. He spent the rest of his life moving from city to city teaching of Jesus and establishing churches.

Our reading for today begins with a vision. Paul has a vision. At the time, Paul and his companions had been trying to move different cities in order to spread the gospel. But each time, for reasons that aren't explained, they are thwarted in their plans. But one night, Paul has a vision. And in this vision a man pleads to him saying, *Come over to Macedonia and help me.* Immediately, Paul and his companions set sail for Macedonia certain that God is calling them to proclaim the good news.

Several hundred years earlier, Macedonia had been a kingdom in Greece. It was, in fact, the birthplace of Alexander the Great. But by the time of Paul, Macedonia was no longer a kingdom but was a province. In going there, Paul set his sights on Philippi as the principal city of that region. Philippi was a Roman colony.

Normally, when Paul arrived at a new city, on the Sabbath he would make his way to the synagogue. For example, earlier in Acts, we read:

And on the sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading of the law and the prophets, the officials of the synagogue sent them a message, saying, 'Brothers, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, give it.' So, Paul stood up and with a gesture began to speak...

That is what he did. On the Sabbath day, he would go to the synagogue. And it makes sense. If you want to tell people about the son of God, then why not start out with the people who already worship that God. Paul would go to the synagogue and teach about the Son of God. Understandably, he wasn't always well received there. Sometimes he was jailed or run out of town.

But in Philippi, Paul does something different. He doesn't go to the synagogue as was his normal practice. Instead, he went outside the gate of the city, a gate which was near a river. Why he went to this place is not entirely known. All we are told is, *On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where [he] supposed there was a place of prayer.* I would guess that Paul had been doing his homework, asking around town and learning that this spot outside the gate was a popular place for people to go and to pray, Presumably, these were people who did not feel welcomed at the synagogue. This spot outside the gate had become an alternative worship site. There were some women at the place who were praying, and Paul joins them and tells them about Jesus.

Among the women was one named Lydia. We are given three pieces of information about Lydia. One, she was a worshipper of God. She was not Jewish, but she was one of those gentiles who had become a follower of the Jewish god.

The second piece of information is that Lydia, like Paul, is a foreigner. She was not from Macedonia and she was not Greek. She was from the city of Thyatira. Thyatira was across the Aegean Sea from Macedonia in what is now modern Turkey. It is a distance of about 250 miles from Philippi as the crow flies.

At the time, Thyatira was a vibrant business and trading center. And this ties in with the third bit of information about the woman. She is described as being a *dealer in purple cloth*. In those days, purple was an extraordinarily expensive color to produce. Purple clothes were not cheap. That is one reason that we associate the color purple with royalty. They had the wealth to afford purple. And Lydia was a dealer in this valuable commodity. She likely traveled back and forth between her suppliers at home and her Macedonian sales territory.

As Paul spoke to Lydia, we are told that God *opened her heart to listen eagerly* to what Paul was saying. We are then told that Lydia and her household eventually came to be baptized. And then she insists that Paul and the others stay in her home while they were in Philippi. Some call Lydia the first Christian convert in Europe (although she was not European).

Paul's mission in the second part of his life was to obey the great commission as set out by Jesus—to *make disciples of all nations* (Mt 28:19). That is what he was doing—going through the world and seeking out receptive spirits and teaching them about Christ. He would gather these people into worship communities guiding them in how to live together as followers of Christ. In Philippi, Paul would establish a church. We know this from the letter that he would write back to them later—the Letter to the Philippians, a letter in which he would write these words: *Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.*

So, today, in the spirit of the Apostle Paul, I want to share with you another vision, a vision that I have had—a vision to establish a worship community here at First Presbyterian Church.

For many years, this church has had two worship services—an early service and a late service. The late service, or Sanctuary Service (where we are now), is a traditional Presbyterian worship service with choir and organ and liturgy and ritual. The early service, or Chapel Service, had a more contemporary feel with the praise band and doughnuts. Sadly, the Chapel Service was a victim of the covid pandemic.

That was three years ago. It has been my vision for some time to resurrect the Chapel Service but in a different form. It would still be a contemporary style with a praise band, but it needs to be more than that. It needs to be a worship service that speaks to those who don't feel comfortable going to the synagogue—the worshippers who are praying outside the city gate. These are the people we must reach out to if we are going to be true to Christ's commission. And to emphasize that it is something new, we're giving it a name. This service will be called the New Covenant Community. And we are inviting people to come and worship under that banner.

In three weeks, on November 5, we will have our first service. It will be at 9:00 a.m. in the Chapel. We will also shift our Sunday schedule back so that this service will begin not at 10:00, but at 11:00 a.m. (like it says in the Bible), and Sunday School will be at 10.

Between now and then, we will be doing a lot to get the word out about the New Covenant Community. There will be a website going live this week. We will have a logo. There will be banners and yard signs to place around town, especially at the entrances to the new apartment complexes. We will be sending out 1000 postcards. There will be digital media. But most of all, we will need your word of mouth to tell everyone what is happening at this place of prayer. I have faith that we are offering something that people are searching for.

How many people will show up the first week or two? I have no idea. But I want to be ready when they do. It will likely take a few months for the service to get traction. But I have faith that it will.

I need your help. I'm going to have a meeting soon to plan out the details of the first few weeks of this service. If you can help, please let me know. I need greeters. I need someone in the parking lot directing folk to the chapel. I need people to participate in the service. I need someone to make the coffee and bring snacks. More than anything, I need everyone to pray—to pray for our church, to pray for our community, to pray for those who are seeking a church home but may not know it.

Lastly, if you choose to attend the NCC, then you also have to promise to worship in this service as well. We are not sacrificing one for the other.

In the story about Paul and Lydia, do you remember what happened at the end? Lydia invited Paul and the others to come and stay at her home. The one that came to Christ—Lydia—immediately turned around and offered something back. She welcomed strangers where once she herself was a stranger. When people show up to worship with us, when we give them something, we shouldn't be surprised if they give right back.

The question we can ask ourselves right now is what kind of church does God want us to be? What is the vision that God is putting out there for us? Because I believe that at this point in time that we have the opportunity to answer that question and act on it in a very real way. And I believe that we are about to have an encounter with the Holy Spirit. And so I warn you, get ready.