

Sunday Morning Worship Service

May 22, 2022

Prelude

Welcome, Greetings and Announcements

Call to Worship

Prayer

Opening Hymn Be Thou My Vision VT #549

Lighting of the Peace Lamp

Prayer for Peace

Hymn Guide Me, O Though Great Jehovah VT #606

Joys and Concerns

Congregational Prayer

With the Children

Hymn Guide My Feet VT #816

Scripture Reading Acts 16: 6 - 15

Sermon Patrick

Hymn of Response Spirit of God! Descend VT #557

Spoken Benediction

Sung Benediction Lead Me, Guide Me VT #601

Postlude

Acts 16:6-15

Paul's Vision of the Man of Macedonia

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. 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.' 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.

The Conversion of Lydia

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, 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. 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. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper 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. 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.

I paraphrase a part of Joel 2 which appears in the Pentecost event referenced in Acts 2 (vv17ff)—the old shall dream dreams, sons and daughters shall prophesy, and the young shall see visions. I am probably middle aged because I do have dreams which I can remember, but also the periodic vision. Dreamers and visionaries—we are all somewhere on the spectrum. The general theme for this morning’s sermon will be one of visions. Visions are a part of how God gets things done here on earth. Paul has a vision, Lydia has a vision, God has a vision, and we have visions. The text for this morning, however, is not as straight forward as we might expect. Still, it is our story for helping us direct our lives because most of our lives are not as straight forward as we might expect. We begin with the vision (ὄραμα) Ananias had which led him to the Saul who would become Paul.

Ananias has a vision (Acts 9:10-15) in which God directed him to visit Saul / Paul to administer a healing touch on behalf of God. Ananias quarrelled with God-- I know about this Saul guy and he is a bad dude! God responds that Saul / Paul will become an “instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles”. Ananias, probably rightly so, complies with God’s directive in the vision. Sometimes visions lead to the healing and empowerment of others.

Fast forward now to chapter 16 and Paul is eager to bring God’s name before the people of Asia-- Gentiles. This is his business. This is what he has been healed for. He is a missionizing / proselytizing / evangelizing machine. He has a vision to share of God’s goodness with others and what better location than an important region within the Roman Empire¹. Why would he not ply his spiritual craft in a region with so many significant cities? Paul wants to speak of the Jesus Way, but alas the Holy Spirit forbids him to speak the word in Asia (16:6). Paul is thwarted in his call and commission! Paul has a vision and it is quashed. How about that! Question: have you ever felt called or commissioned to something and it just didn’t work out? In this segment from Acts 16 we have a biblical story which echoes those experiences of fallow hopes and deferred dreams. It reminded me of an article I read in a MEDA publication some years back.

There was once a woman in Ukraine who lost her whole crop to frost. Some would describe this as failure. But she didn’t give up. She chose to dream big. She chose to rise to the challenge. Her name is Olga and...Olga is like countless other entrepreneurs who dare the world to tear down their dreams. They admit failure, learn from their experience and then try again.

¹ *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce Metzger and Michael Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 62.

At MEDA, I (author Alexandra Harmash) am proud to say that we invest in these dreams. I am privileged to be a witness to their dreams and I am honoured to partner with them as they overcome obstacles and succeed. At MEDA, we recognize that women are frequent drivers of economic and social change at the community level and we design our projects with them in mind.

We know that these women are changing their world. I watch women navigate the challenges of running a business. I watch as they struggle to gain access to markets, remain isolated from supply chains and gain access to financing. But more importantly, I watch them support their families financially, I see them invest in other women and I witness them expanding their technical skills.... My favourite question to pose to our clients is – what wisdom would you like to share with new entrepreneurs? Here is what our entrepreneurs had to say:

- Say yes; Be brave; Be honest; Be confident; Be active
Their answers always leave me humbled and in awe of their knowledge, strength and courage. Over the remainder of this project, I am excited to watch thousands of women step out with confidence. I know that even when they fail, they will look at it with resolution and determination. I know they will find a solution. I know that they will be a stronger entrepreneur because of it.²

We say yes. We are brave. We are honest and confident. The crop fails. We fail. The geopolitical world fails. We learn. We listen again. We say yes again.

I have offered this particular story for several reasons. Mennonite Central Committee had its origins in serving the starving of Ukraine and South Russia 100 years ago. MEDA has had projects in Ukraine through the decades. Given the economic turmoil of Ukraine and Russia, both probably need our focused and benevolent economic support more than ever.

Paul eventually does offer his testimony in Asia and it takes root because we have letters in our New Testament addressed to that geographic region: letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, and the seven churches referenced in John's revelation (chapters 1-4). Sometimes visions and dreams take time to unfold. Sometimes we are called to patience and trust. Oftentimes.

Following the text, Paul is granted a new vision (Acts 16:10; ὄραμα)—a vision of a Macedonian man begging him to come visit. Typical to the Luke Acts narrative we have a male / female couplet as two gentiles embrace the way of Jesus Christ. The woman is Lydia, who is a well-resourced business woman who deals in all things purple, and the man is the prison jailer. For today our focus will be on

² <https://www.meda.org/blog/the-key-to-being-a-successful-entrepreneur-dream-big-and-be-brave/>

Lydia. This male / female symmetry of Luke / Acts, however, should not be overlooked. Restrictions to the faith community based on profession or gender identification is narratively rejected by Luke and Acts. This, in and of itself, is Good News. Let us look at Lydia and then consider those Christ-like behaviours which transcend gender or profession in the living of God's vision.

The structure of Acts 16.12-40 is important for it reveals how vital it was that Lydia provide a meeting place for Christians. Luke is at pains to show that the Gospel and its followers can exist within the confines of the Roman authority by creating its own space 'in house'. That Luke portrays a woman, Lydia, providing such a meeting place for Christians in the city is crucial. Thus, he shows that the faith, while not subservient to Rome, is not fundamentally at odds with the Roman Empire or its authorities.

The story of Lydia is extraordinary in many regards...Luke portrays Lydia as having come to Philippi from her native city of Thyatira, famous for its production of clothing goods with a distinctive and very popular royal purple dye. Perhaps she had moved to an environment where she could better take advantage of imperial Roman tastes and needs. [She is a business woman!]

One of the significant messages Luke is apparently trying to get across is that Paul, in contrast to his Jewish background, is willing to begin a local church with a group of women converts. That women could constitute the embryonic church, but not the embryonic synagogue, reveals the difference in the status of women in the two faiths at that time, and it seems likely that Luke intended for us to draw this contrast by mentioning the 'place of prayer' (16.13) and the church meeting (16.40)....

Lydia's significance was not confined to her being a disciple or hostess to travelling disciples. Luke wishes us to understand that what began as a lodging for missionaries, became the home of the...church in Philippi. This is suggested by the fact that when Paul and Silas emerge from prison they go to Lydia's house to encourage the [seekers 16.40], rather than to the Philippian jailor's house where they had also been entertained (16.34).

Once again, we see how a woman's fruitful role of providing hospitality played an integral part in the establishment and continuance of a local church. ...Here a women progresses from being a marginal member of a Jewish circle in which she could never receive the covenantal sign, to being a central figure in the local Christian church and the first baptized convert in Europe."³

In consideration of the text, it is at this point that I will venture into the uncertain waters of application to our lives, and I do so given the texts of the day.

³ Ben Witherington III, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press: 1990), pp 215-216.

Baptism. Lydia had a vision. Verse 17 says that Lydia and her household were baptized. I support people who are not formally affiliated with Nutana Mennonite be it through baptism or through the sharing of their story. People are connected to this congregation in a variety of ways, and that resonates to the text of Acts 16 as well as the Jewish tradition of respecting “God fearers” into much of the life of a local Jewish synagogue. And at the same time, I still think baptism or articulating our journey or formally saying “yes” to a Jesus or a group is important. No doubt I am showing my age, but I do believe the things we say in public reflect who we are and who we want to become. Thomas Long has written, “saying things out loud is part of how we come to believe. We talk our way *toward* belief, talk our way from tentative belief through doubt to firmer belief, talk our way toward believing more fully, more clearly, and more deeply. Putting things into words is one of the ways we acquire knowledge, passion, and conviction”.⁴ Lydia, and her household, took the step of baptism. It makes me wonder the potential role of public displays of intention in our world—be it baptism, marriage, or vocation. As I said, I am beginning to show my age so take what is good for you and leave the rest.

Hospitality was a tool in the ministry box of Lydia. It was part of her vision on a way to undergird and grow the church in Philippi. She provided space, leadership, and yummy potluck treats to those who gathered at her place. How about NPMC?

This past Monday the Church Council again took time to consider how we might faithfully offer hospitality in this COVID world. I offer my impressions of this discussion so that people are aware that considerable discernment continues and that such questions are not easily answered.

- For now, we will defer to those most vulnerable of our community and remain masked for worship and other indoor church gatherings like funerals or weddings. The thought of us all unmasked and singing full throttle just didn't seem appropriate given the vulnerability of some and the capacity of our health system. Was it a vision? I am not sure, but it was discernment.
- Rental Groups-- These folk get to make their own decisions about meeting requirements in line with their sponsor organizations and bearing responsibility for their policy.

Hospitality more broadly: In my personal and professional life I have gone from the early years of hosting people for slow cooker soup and bread lunches on many a Sunday to inviting people out to coffee shops to now being a part of ZOOM socials. I do think the incarnation of Jesus and the hospitality he offered his community is significant and a model for his people, and I honour the concerns

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

of our health professionals. And this leaves me, at times, somewhat at a loss on what Christian ministry through hospitality might mean in this time and place.

And then I get an invitation for, or initiate, a walk and talk. And I go.

And then I get an invitation to help with a move. And I go.

And then someone calls the church, or God forbid stops by, and I cease my work on the important so that I might attend to the essential.

And I make a choice to meet others in a restaurant.

And we talk about card and cookie deliveries.

And I am trying, like many, to figure out incarnational ministry (in person or otherwise) means in this time and place. We are following the visions being given and heard.

Hospitality to the refugees. Late last week I went over to the home of Garry and Glenis. I beheld the wonder of their garage which is full of stuff for the Specio family which will be arriving sometime this summer as part of another NPMC refugee sponsorship. Amazing. The refugees do not all have origins of Ukraine or Afghanistan. At several points in the epistles we find Paul appealing to more established churches to offer support for those people hurting in their communities or displaced. As we are able, let us continue in this vision of hospitality.

I have spoke of visions of Ananias, Paul, and Lydia. Finally, it is time to draw attention to the fact that this is all a greater part of God's Vision. This church business is ultimately God's work. We do the best we can. We share our bit of God's story to those in our families and the groups around us. And then, sometimes, we do not go where we thought we might. Our hopes and expectations fail. New visions come. God draws new people into the movement, and we are invited to go with their strengths and gifts. At some point we get to Macedonia and its contemporary equivalent. And at some point someone goes to Asia. It is in the end, though, God's work which will be completed in God's time. So let us do our little part. Let us be of good courage. And let us trust. Amen.

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