

6th Sunday of Easter
Sermon 5.22.22

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." 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. 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 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. 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.

John 14:23-29

Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me."
"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. (397)

There's that bumper sticker: "All who wander are not lost." Have you seen this? Do you *have* this? "All who wander are not lost."

I'd say it's true, sort of.

Like Paul, for example. You could say he was wandering, though not lost. He ended up in faraway Macedonia. He had directions, so to speak, a man having appeared to him in a vision at night asking him, "Come over to Macedonia to help us."

That said, it wasn't much to go on, and a very far way to go, the furthest in fact that Paul is known to have gone, and at a time when people rarely went, over the course of their whole lifetimes, more than a few miles away from home.

For starters, it was to do, hard on the body, hard on the feet. It's not for nothing, those biblical stories of people washing one another's feet, oiling them with ointment.

Then there was the fact that it was risky, even dangerous. You never knew what you'd find, or what would find you. Hospitality held, and it was held in high esteem. As a tradition, a practice,

hospitality could buoy you along in safe circumstances. But that too was a risk, for what would happen if you were hoping for hospitality and that's not what you got? Then what?

A man appeared before him and beckoned him to come to faraway Macedonia—so he did, leaving Troas, setting out across the sea. It was a direct route, not a long sail. But it did come following a long period of lots of wandering and without any real direction.

It had been fifteen years since his conversion. In Damascus, in now-a-day Syria, Paul had gone from being the strictest Pharisee and hater of the nascent church, to being just as fearless a servant of the Jesus Way. Over that time, he'd traveled overland from Damascus to Jerusalem and back again, then north to modern-day Turkey and back again.

Where we catch up him this morning, he's on the second of three missionary journeys. This one had him traveling with Timothy and Silas, who might have been the "we" mentioned in this passage: "We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace..." This would have him spend a few years traveling west-ish through Turkey north of its coastline.

All in all, a long period, fifteen years since his conversion, it's recounted over the course of seven chapters in the book of Acts.

Seven chapters: fifteen years. What takes you a half hour to read took Paul fifteen years to live. Apparently, a lot of his life went unnarrated. As for the more recent two or three years, that's covered in the last half of the 15th chapter, and this first half of the 16th—thirty verses or so. One bit of commentary said it thus: "On this, Paul's second missionary journey, he followed ancient routes...and he was guided largely by the Holy Spirit..." But, as for the "lack of account along much of this journey," the scriptural narrative going silent on so much time passing which indicates that "they (Paul, Timothy, and Silas) were continually waiting for guidance."

Sometimes the Holy Spirit is silent. Sometimes that mysterious spur to act doesn't happen.

So, you wait. And you wander. And you do your regular day, you live in ordinary time, you go here, you talk to that person there. And maybe you're a little lost.

You wait.

A way will show itself.

You'll get some urge or notice something you hadn't noticed before.

Just wait.

It finally came when they arrived in the port city of Troas and, settling in there, spending some time there, talking to people here-and-there there, that man appeared, a vision at night.

The slow passage of time is one of the hardest qualities of our ancient faith to get modern believers to sense and remember. The Bible, so full of wild action, doesn't bother to tell us when not much happens. We meet Abraham, for example, and next thing we know he's ninety years old, with no accounting for what he did all that time while becoming ninety years old. We meet Jesus, laid in the manger, and next we know he's thirty years old—and with no accounting for what happened during those intervening years. We meet Paul, he undergoes a dramatic conversion and then hits the road, and next thing we know fifteen years have passed and he's in Philippi meeting someone whom he saw to be listening to him as he talked to the group gathered near the river—but who, notably, isn't the person he saw in that vision imploring him to come over, to come help them.

Lydia seems wholly unconnected to that man of the vision.

Indeed, that man of the vision seems wholly unconnected to anything that would happen to Paul once he got to Macedonia, Samothrace, Neapolis, Philippi.

The original cause that got Paul to go had nothing to do with anything that happened when he got there.

What's more, all that happened when he got there is that this one woman listened to him in a particular way while Paul, and Timothy and Silas were all talking with this group of women. She was listening to him, which he noticed, which had her listening all the more, eagerly the story says. So he baptized her, and baptized her whole household, and then he stayed her for a while—a week, a month, a few months...?

This is what happened as a noteworthy event, which was one of just a few noteworthy events, on a two- or three-years long journey.

This, which is only slightly related to the original cause of this whole thing.

The church struggles with this, I think. Preachers will often struggle with this. They'll make the most of Lydia. The likes of me: we've been known to claim Lydia is important for some particular reason. A seller of purple cloth, she was likely rich and maybe known among royalty, or people who knew royalty, for such were the people who would buy purple cloth. The head of a household, she was perhaps a widow, though revered enough to have people in her care. She was a woman of means! It's as if these qualities about her would make the whole thing a little less embarrassing. It can't just be that Paul wandered for two years, three years, for this little thing to happen to this rather ordinary woman, and now we say, "Hooray!"

People in the pews perhaps struggle with this as well. It's tough to tolerate that this whole important story isn't all that important. It's tough to believe this gentle encounter is worth such prime real estate—a place in the Bible, a place in the season of Easter, a place in our faith. There must be something more to it, something we're not seeing. Can the life of faith really come down to regular people listening eagerly to one another, passing time together, letting a day unfold, letting a month unfold?

Of course, all of it might be true. Lydia might have been wealthy, might have been a widow, might have known kings, might have been revered. But the story doesn't say any of those things. It only tells us a couple details about her as if the details weren't to signify anything, just to individuate her, to respect her particularity. This was a real person, the story seems to insist. Like you who drives the red car, or you who lives in the brown house, this was someone who sold purple cloth. And Paul noticed her because she was especially engaged with what they had to say. And this was enough to justify as important this whole long journey of Paul's recent couple of years.

I hope the Holy Spirit's happy. All that trouble...

How open are you to the Holy Spirit?

How expectant are you that, if you're searching for what to do next—with your day, with your life—something will come to you? An idea will dawn. An urge will compel.

How much room do you leave for something to *come* to you—not for you to come up with a plan but for something as if outside yourself arriving as a next step? A hope prevailing upon you as you gently steer your course.

I spoke on Easter Sunday of the middle voice, which I heard later from a few people there was a new register, a compelling mode.

The middle voice is a feature in languages other than English, but not every language other than English. It does feature in ancient Greek, which is the language of the New Testament.

In the middle voice, there is space made for when the subject of the sentence is as much acted upon as active, and when a larger process is at work rather than mere cause and effect.

See, in English, we have the active voice, which would have the subject of the sentence as the prime mover of the action: "I am broiling vegetables for dinner." And we have the passive voice, which has the subject of the sentence acted upon: "These vegetables will be broiled." What we only hardly have is the middle voice, which allows for a complex of active participants, the grandest of which might go unnamed. "The vegetables are broiling in the oven."

You could also put that in the passive: “The vegetables are being broiled in the oven.” But both are awkward because both make active things that can’t be active on their own. It would make no sense. Ovens can’t broil without a cook. Vegetables can’t broil without a cook. In the middle voice, a larger actor is understood to be at work, moving all those little actions, all those tiny causes and effects, now put to larger purpose toward some final goal. The vegetables start to get burnt. The cook opens the oven door and flips them over.

It strikes me that languages with just the active and the passive have a harder time imagining the middle—the middle ground of call and response, of action and response, a field of play if you will. It seems to me that languages without the middle voice fashion people who might be able to manage their lives very well (thank you very much) but can only hardly connect with the Holy Spirit. This, for having a hard time imagining that there *is* a Holy Spirit, that there *is* some field of play larger than cause and effect. It seems to me the likes of us struggle, really struggle, to allow for reality as a realm intervened into by...well...God. Really, the languages without the middle voice might fashion a people who imagine themselves as the drivers of everything, without whom nothing would happen.

Remember early in quarantine? I was always amazed that the day would pass without me having done anything but stay home. Just like the that, time would be passing.

But how could this be without my pushing the sun across the sky with all my busyness, with all my busy doing?

On the flip side, of course, with but the active and passive as options for living and imagining our living, it fashions people who have a hard time managing their lives, and maybe because life doesn’t seem like something they want to manage. So they buy bumper stickers for their cars, that say, as defensive as it is wishful: “Not all who wander are lost.”

Which I think is true. Sort of. Because some who wander *are* lost.

I know some people who seem lost. Maybe you do too. It’s hard to know what to do to help such people reconnect with what matters in life. As if you know. As if I know.

That’s pretty arrogant, don’t you think?

Jesus is still speaking of his own leaving. As we heard him this morning, he’s amidst his so-called Farewell Discourse. It’s the Last Supper, Jesus gathered with his friends in an upper room in Jerusalem. Judas has left, to go quickly do what he was about to do. Jesus has realized his hour has come. And now he’s speaking of leaving, yet in terms that have to do with staying. “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our

home with them.” This is a favorite word for Jesus, according to John anyway. *Menos* is the Greek, and it shows up in English as “abide” or “stay” or “dwell” or “make our home.”

And there’s a contradiction here, it seems to me. That Jesus imagines himself as both abiding and leaving. That Jesus reassures his friends of his yet dwelling with them while he’s got one foot out the door, about to step from this realm to the next, though with several appearances before he’s more fully gone. But how can it both, that he remains though he has gone? Can it both, that he abides with us and yet has gone ahead of us?

How can you be both free and bound? How can you be both wandering but moored to some larger reality that holds you, that finds you?

I went to see the Lenox prom kids in their parade from their cars to the event in the stables at the Mount, Edith Wharton’s estate. All dressed up, all *grown* up, these are kids (many of them) I’ve known for thirteen years, from when they were in kindergarten to now that they’re graduating and moving on to what’s next.

And they looked so different, all dressed up, all grown up, moving in pairs or in groups or on their own across Mrs. Wharton’s lawn to her stable where they’d dance like she probably wished she could have in her stuffy lifetime of being too rich for her own enjoyment.

I missed them during quarantine—these kids. I think I missed them most of all the things I missed—my kids’ friends who changed so much while tucked away in all of our isolation.

And now here they were, totally transformed. I could barely recognize some of them. But then I could. The seed was there. The essence, the manner, the look on the face, the light in the eye, the gesture or attitude. Totally transformed. And utterly the same.

How can this be?

The Holy Spirit. Allow for its grace. Allow for its movement. Allow for its surprising power in your life. Don’t mistake your own capacity to control things for participating in a power whose gift is peace, assurance.

Go on with your life, and take your home with you ago, this abiding Spirit God who offers us such gifts as summer in the Berkshires. It’s about to happen—as surprising and assuring as ever. Rest assured in this restless spirit.

Thanks be to God.