

She really had felt very little when her husband died. It had been a loveless, arranged marriage between the two families and he was a good bit older than she. So it was almost liberation when a mysterious illness took him within a matter of weeks. It felt like liberation not least because she had played a major role in developing their dealership of the expensive purple dye used in the clothing of the very wealthy in her community.

The dye came from the eastern Mediterranean from the secretions of sea snails found in that part of the world. It cost so much because it took something like 12,000 snails just to produce a gram or two of the dye. Her husband had the connections to import the precious blackish liquid, but she was the one skilled in soaking the wool for hours until the dye was fully absorbed so that it didn't fade easily and colored the basic material for the garments shaped and woven into cloaks and togas for their customers.

It was those same customers who almost demanded that she take over the business after her husband died, even though she was a woman. They had come to depend on the quality of her work and there weren't that many such artisans in their Roman settlement just across the Aegean Sea from Athens. She was a Greek Macedonian herself, but had long since become accepted and even respected in her adopted hometown of Philippi.

The first few years after her husband's death had been extremely busy as she built the business into an even more successful enterprise. She was willing to take risks in the pricing of their products her husband had never been willing to take, and even increased the purchase price of the purple cloth, a cost most of her customers were happy to pay for. She had to do that because she was not only a business woman, but the mother of three growing children which she increasingly needed assistance to take care of as the work load increased in their expanding market.

But, after a while, even the success of her burgeoning enterprise failed to slake the deep thirst for purpose and meaning she had always harbored deep within. This couldn't be "all there was" to life! So she began attending the local Jewish synagogue in town. She'd always been attracted by the dedication and

commitment of the small Jewish community in her area. She had not known much about Jewish theology outside the fact that they claimed the existence of only one God -- One they believed had liberated them from bondage in Egypt centuries before and had preserved them as a people through an even more recent Exile in Babylon. Her initial attraction to Judaism was the centrality of family and the home, something she'd always longed for, but had never really experienced.

So, each Sabbath day she would join the other "God fearers" seated in the back of the synagogue. These were Gentiles who, while not quite ready to take the leap and become Jews themselves, were enthralled by this ancient faith and found that the practical moral and ethical teaching of these rather stand-offish people made sense and actually seemed to improve the quality of their lives to the extent that they were able to observe the commandments and follow the wisdom of Jewish teaching.

When the weather was nice, the community often met just outside the gates of the city down by the river. The breezes were pleasant there, and many seemed to appreciate praying by the waters which reminded them of the place the Red Sea and the Jordan River had played in their own history. They had been brought into freedom more than once by passing through water just like this!

It was in this unlikely location that she first heard the man Paul and his companions expound on the Torah and prophetic readings for the day. They seemed to believe that the mysterious figure of liberation hinted at throughout the Hebrew Bible had actually appeared. His name was Jesus and he had lived and taught in Palestine only for a few years before being executed by the Romans because they had feared that his followers would proclaim him as their king and challenge the authority of Caesar and his puppets, King Herod and the governor Pontius Pilate.

But, according to Paul, death had not been able to contain the man or his message and rather than scattering like the disciples of so many so-called Messiahs, this community of Christ-followers was growing and expanding across the Mediterranean world and forming cell groups to live a kind of counter-cultural life and to spread the teachings of this charismatic figure. Paul himself had once

persecuted this group, but an experience of Jesus transformed even him and he now considered himself a disciple equal to those original Twelve who had been hand-selected by the Teacher.

Paul, and his friend Luke, said that this Jesus was not like other rabbis and prophets who had come before, but that there was a contemporaneous quality about him. He wasn't just a deceased martyr or even an historical figure. His Spirit – which some called “the Paraclete,” the “Advocate” – had been poured out on his followers and seemed to inspire them to teach as he had taught and even do some of the same amazing things he himself had done!

She saw that in Paul and Luke and the others. And she soon wanted more than anything else to have the kind of peace, and joy, and love she saw in them become part of her own life and that of her children. So, she and her family began attending not only the synagogue on the Sabbath but began joining the so-called “Christians” for the common meal they shared after the sun went down and the Sabbath was over.

It was at one of those meals that she found herself asking how she might join their movement. Within a very few weeks, she and her children were immersed in that same river by which the Jewish community prayed and, when they rose up, the water streaming from their faces, they knew that nothing would ever be quite the same again!

---

Well, that may not be exactly how it happened for Lydia of Thyatira about whom we heard in our First Lesson today. But it must have been something like that. We do know that, in gratitude for the new life she and her family had been given, she invited Paul and Luke to use her home as a kind of base of operations for their Philippian mission.

We also know that she is considered a saint in several Christian traditions, including our own, and that several Eastern Orthodox churches designate her “Equal to the Apostles,” inspiring icons to be written in her honor.

I think for us she may at least be considered an extremely courageous, first-century woman and a seeker after truth. If Luke's account in Acts is correct, we may also see her as an example of one of the earliest women leaders in the Christian church, starting by providing hospitality to Paul and his companions – an act which in and of itself underscores her courage since it placed her and her household in some danger. Maybe she is patron saint of the sanctuary movement!

I close with the prayer written for Lydia in our most recent addition of the liturgical resource *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* and with the intention that we may have the courage to follow her good example. Let us pray:

“Eternal God, who gives good gifts to **all people**, and who teaches us to have the same spirit of **generosity**: Give us, we pray, hearts that are always **open** to hear your word, that following the example of your servant Lydia, we may show **hospitality to all** who are in **any** need or trouble, through Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen”