

Sermon May 22, 2022

Acts 16.9-15, New Song

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In the summer of 2008, Meg Wagner and I led a two-year confirmation class of Trinity high schoolers on a pilgrimage to Greece. With perfect timing we were out of town for the worst of the flood. One of our stops was Phillipi, the town built by Alexander the Great's father Phillip and in Paul's time a major city in the Roman empire, as St. Luke tells us.

We walked amid the large-scale ruins of the elaborate Roman construction, trying to visualize how it was for those apostles long ago when those stones were on top of each other and there was all manner of markets, temples, theatres, roads, and so forth.

At some point we walked away from the ruins over to a large grassy area, where there was a small but swiftly flowing clear stream. Then it hit us—Lydia, and baptism. That was the place.

Lydia, a busy prosperous cloth seller to the elite of Phillipi, a God-seeker, which was an early Christian term for a Gentile who frequented Jewish life and worship, enjoying the contrast to Roman civil religion while themselves not going all the way and being circumcised—THIS WAS WHERE SHE WAS BAPTIZED! Christian missionaries like St. Paul loved the God-seekers, gaining many converts from the group. Her professional life took a pause as she sought out a quiet nook for prayer and reflection, perhaps several days a week. As one scholar put it, “contemplative Mary and active Martha in one.” Then today a bonus—a group of Jewish folks came here also outside the gate for prayer.

In our Iowa City group were two youth who had not been baptized. They had declined the ritual over the previous two years, for reasons that between them included 1) being clear it was their decision, not the family's or church's; and 2) having some doubt about "the whole Christian thing" and needing to be clear about their own faith.

As we had approached this part of our journey, Meredith and Wyatt became clear that they wanted to join their fellow pilgrims in baptism. And when we saw the stream and the three steps down into it as the baptismal place, the magic began. They stood in the stream, I poured water over their heads and anointed them with oil, and they rose out of the water to the joyous welcome of their friends. It still takes my breath away.

Do you realize what it took for the Holy Spirit to bring off that event? From leaving Iowa City

one day before we would have been trapped in the city, to having chosen and done fundraising for this particular pilgrimage for a year, to the movement in Wyatt's and Meredith's hearts and minds, to turning away from the stone ruins to, like St. Paul and Lydia, find a quiet place for prayer. That place being holy ground, then the rest flowed as swiftly and clear as the stream. All of this takes a lot of trust of the Spirit in each person and some restraint of our desire to control.

For all of his flaws, St. Paul knew how to listen to the Holy Spirit. The Apostolic heavies in Jerusalem had just supported him with conditions, including doing work in Asia Minor. But then he has this dream vision about going to Macedonia, and he bails on Asia Minor. The sea travel is easy, all the moving parts of the Spirit's movement are working, and he and Lydia end up at the same place at the same

time on the sabbath. He has trusted, and Lydia's house becomes the home base for the important Phillipian church. Wow!

How is your sense of trust these days for the Holy Spirit working something in you or through you or because of you? Later when we say the Creed and come to the Holy Spirit part, try thinking of those questions alongside the Creed's' fourth century doctrinal words. It takes faith to trust that the Spirit will do the impossible. Look around. We have our share of "impossibles" that we trust the Spirit will find a way through. What is our role? Trust and visionary cooperation.

Finally, a word about place. The youth group found that bank of the stream to give us special gifts while we were there, ones that continue to give. Apostolic footsteps had hallowed that ground, the Spirit had acted there, holiness was in the air, the water and the ground.

Lydia and Paul had gone “outside the gate” of the city to pray there. That phrase has a special meaning in Christian writings. The letter to the Hebrews most famously notes that sacrificed animals are burned outside the Jerusalem city walls, “therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate...Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured.”

Jesus ministry to the vulnerable and powerless and the fringe, plus his attempt to bring in the kingdom of God from a donkey not a warhorse, are all wrapped up in the phrase “outside the gate.” Outside the norms of society and the ruling class.

Meredith and Wyatt were baptized outside the gate. You have been baptized to be outside the gate, led by the Spirit in the steps of Lydia, of St. Paul, of our Lord.

Amen.

