

“A certain woman named Lydia”
Based on Acts 16: 9-15
by Rev. Meghan Davis
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Paul had a vision. Following that vision took Paul in the complete opposite direction of where he intended to go. From Troas Paul was going to go east to Bithynia, but then this vision called him to go west to Macedonia.

Paul had a vision. What was the vision? I’ve always thought the vision was a dream Paul had while sleeping. And the thought of assuming a sleeping dream is a message from God and immediately acting on it, is a little unnerving for me. If I interpreted every dream I’ve had as a message from God, and acted on it, I’d be doing some pretty weird things. And even if I take a dream to be a message from God, there’s the matter of interpretation. What is God telling me? Perhaps I’m being over-rational, but I can’t help but wonder, how does Paul even know he’s interpreting the dream correctly?

But the text doesn’t specify what kind of vision it was. It could have been a vision he had while awake. Maybe it was something like the hologram vision of Princess Leia in *Star Wars*, “Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi; you’re my only hope.” A man from Macedonia (minus R2D2) asked Paul for help in his vision. “Help me, Paul; you’re our only hope.”

A man from Macedonia asked Paul for help in the vision. But it is a woman whom he first meets. It is a woman who is his first convert in Philippi. A woman who offers her home for Paul’s mission. God opened her heart and she opened her home. Paul wasn’t expecting Lydia any more than he was expecting to go to Macedonia in the first place. And yet there he is. And there she is.

“A certain woman named Lydia...” We know so little about her, and yet we are intrigued. At least, I am. Part of the intrigue probably comes from the fact that we know so little about her, and about other women in the Bible. In the Bible, women are outnumbered by men by a long shot. So whenever a woman is mentioned, she’s pretty important. And I don’t just say that because I am a woman looking for self-validation by finding sisters in the sacred text. It is widely believed in Biblical scholarship that, for the most part, good women aren’t mentioned in the Bible unless they had to be. For example, Mary Magdalene shows up in the Easter morning accounts of all four Gospels. They probably would have left her out if they could have so the fact that she’s in there is significant. So Lydia is important. She’s important to early Christianity and she’s important to us.

This passage rather nonchalantly delivers some pretty remarkable details: Paul seeks the place of prayer outside the city walls and he finds a group of women. He sits down to speak with the women. Sitting was the posture of a teacher, it would not be common for a man of Paul’s stature to sit and teach to a group of women. And one of those women is Lydia—a worshipper of God, that is, a Gentile who is a believer and follower of Judaism but has not become a full convert. Then, as theologian Ronald Cole-Turner, describes “There at the riverside, Lydia found the God who was finding her.”¹

Lydia is not linked with any man in the text which indicates that she is a rare independent woman in full control of her life and property. She’s a dealer of purple cloth, a businesswoman

¹ Ronald Cole-Turner. *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 474.

—again, not very common in the First Century. Because of the cost of dye and the dying process, purple cloth was extremely expensive and only the wealthiest citizens would be her customers. So basically, Lydia is a First Century Coco Chanel: in the high end fashion industry *and* she is the head of her household, again extremely rare in Rome’s highly patriarchal society. And then she is Paul’s first convert in Europe. She and her household are baptized and then she offers her house as headquarters for Paul’s mission in Philippi, and in doing so, Lydia herself becomes a missionary.

Cole-Turner describes Lydia as: “contemplative Mary and active Martha in one, her heart set on God even while her work gets done.”² Lydia listens to Paul and her heart is opened by God, but she is by no means passive in her spirituality. She takes action in choosing to be baptized, and she takes action in offering her home to Paul and his companions. Not only offering her home but *prevailing* upon them.

In Lydia’s story we see that conversion to God starts with the heart—God opens our heart, then we respond with action. Lydia’s first actions were baptism, faithfulness and hospitality. God opened her heart.

Earlier this year the session and deacons did a study called “Unbinding the Gospel.” The focus of the study is evangelism but the premise is that we cannot grow as a church if our own faith lives, as individuals and as a church, are not strong. We can only share our faith with others, and invite them to join us, if we feel comfortable articulating our own faith.

Early in the study, someone came up with the idea that we should each be praying “together” at the same time of day for the church and for our hearts to be opened. And though the study is over, this prayer remains in my daily prayers. I invite you all to join in daily prayer that God will open our hearts, our minds, our arms and our doors. We often think of “mission” as doing stuff and “evangelism” as talking (and frequently in an unflattering light). But true mission and evangelism are inseparable. It has been said that “authentic mission is always a response to a need within the community, not simply the missionary’s need to proclaim.”³

Have you ever experienced a vision from God? In the early 1990’s George Gallup delivered a lecture at Princeton Seminary in which he said that he’d asked Presbyterians whether they’d ever experienced a vision from God. Over half of the church members he asked said they had and even a higher percentage of clergy responded that they had.⁴ Does that surprise you? (To be honest, it surprises me.) Presbyterian pastor David Forney notes, “Perhaps one reason this statistic is surprising is because we simply do not talk about our visions from God—and maybe for good reason. If we were to talk openly about God’s involvement in our lives, we could not control the plan, as we do in strategic planning. On the other hand, if we *did* share our visions from God, we might find ourselves with open hearts that readily receive the gospel that forever changes us.”⁵

Rev. Forney muses, “Visions are surprising things. When we talk of ‘God’s vision’ today in church, we typically mean strategic planning, as one step in a congregation’s planning process. Perhaps we are comfortable with talking about God’s vision in this way because it

² Ronald Cole-Turner. *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 474.

³ Richard M. Landers. *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 477.

⁴ George Gallup, Sr., public lecture, Princeton Theological Seminary, March 1992.

⁵ David G. Forney. *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 478.

seems manageable to us....However, our well-conceived *scripting of God's* vision, if it is even that, is a very different affair from *receiving from God* a vision.”⁶

Paul's strategic plan was to go to Bithynia. But God's vision was for Paul to go to Macedonia. New Testament scholar Eric Barreto explains, “Unmistakably for Luke, this is the way upon which God plans the church to walk. We ought to follow God's call to reach across cultural and ethnic boundaries and learn to find opportunities to do God's work in unexpected places. In Acts, this road is particularly marked by the panoply of people toward which the Spirit reaches out—Macedonian, Philippian, Thyatirian, Jewish, and Roman alike. Ought not our missional paths bear the same character?”⁷

What if Paul didn't pay attention to his vision? What if Lydia didn't pay attention to the Holy Spirit nudging her toward God, opening her heart and leading her toward baptism, faithfulness and hospitality? Well, for one thing we wouldn't have this story. The Bible, and perhaps even Christianity, would have looked quite different.

What's our story? What's the story of Longview Presbyterian Church? What's the story yet to be written? Most of us have “visions” for the church, hopes and wishes for the church. Maybe we should be paying more attention to those and consider that these visions might be God's visions. Maybe we need to step out onto the boat and sail toward those visions.

I'm going to give you some time to reflect on your vision for the church—either our local church or the larger church. If you're visiting and don't know much about this particular church, consider a vision of the ideal church. Where do you think God is calling us? Just in the last week, I've heard several ideas from people, of what they envision for the church: vacation bible school, community garden, more events for the public, a more holistic approach. British sculptor Henry Moore said, “The secret of life is to have a task, something you do your entire life, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for your whole life. And the most important thing is: It must be something you cannot possibly do.”⁸ What is your vision, your impossible task for the church? Don't worry about whether or not your vision seems feasible. Whatever your vision, whether it seems impractical, improbable, inevitable... Write it down.

I'll be sharing your visions with Session and with you as we seek to heed God's call and set sail. And if you think of more in the next few days—or ever—let me know. Swiss theologian Hans Küng wrote that “A church which pitches its tents without constantly looking out for new horizons, which does not continually strike camp, is being untrue to its calling...[He concludes, that we must] play down our longing for certainty, accept what is risky, and live by improvisation and experiment.”⁹ Together, let us live by improvisation and experiment, seeking to follow Christ's way, seeking a vision for the church. Together let us listen to the Holy Spirit, nudging us toward God, nudging us toward faith, nudging us toward mission. Together let us pursue that which we cannot possibly do, for in God, all things are possible.

⁶ David G. Forney. *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 474.

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Eric Barreto, Commentary on Acts 16: 9-15 Lectionary for May 9, 2010, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx>

⁸ Henry Moore, in conversation with poet Donald Hall about the meaning of life.

⁹ Hans Küng, *The Church as the People of God*