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## **“A Vision toward the “Other”**

**A sermon by Mark E. Diehl**

**Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year A)**

**June 1, 2014**

**Psalm 68:1-10; Acts 16:4-15**

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It was an accident. It wasn't supposed to happen like it did.

The Apostle Paul was returning from a meeting with all the Church Leaders in Jerusalem. This council of Jewish Christian men had taken up the thorny issue of how Gentiles were to be integrated into the church. It was an event that marked the movement of Christianity from being a sect belonging to the Jewish faith to being an independent religion in its own right. No longer would Gentiles be required to follow Jewish practices and traditions in order to enter fully into the Christian community. Since God had placed no restrictions on those who responded to the message of the Gospel, how could these leaders? So they sent Paul off with their blessings and with a few instructions as he continued God's work among the Gentiles.

Paul wanted to strike out in a new direction—a move into Asia to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ. But he was prevented. Paul then set his sights on another location: Bithynia. And again this attempt failed. We don't receive any specific information about the nature of these failures, other than that Paul was “forbidden by the Holy Spirit” or “the Spirit of Jesus did not allow” it.

I don't know about you, but to me that is pretty strong language. For some reason, God had other plans.

This story in Acts tells us nothing about Paul's response or reaction to these denials. What we do hear is that Paul does not stand still. He keeps moving, seeking, probing for some opening, some possibility.

It is here where our scripture text picks up. Paul has a dream, a vision. In it, he sees a man standing before him, pleading with him to come over to Macedonia and help. This was the open door Paul was seeking, and immediately Paul and his traveling companions head out for this new destination.

Macedonia is in another direction from where Paul originally intended to go. Instead of heading to Asia, Paul was heading to Europe.

The writer of Acts makes it perfectly clear that the events about to be described are not accidental; they are not based on luck or happenstance or some happy coincidence. Paul was forbidden one direction and specifically sent in another. God is involved in this.

Have you ever had plans and intentions that you were passionate about, that you considered important, and were committed to carrying out? And then something happens: your plans fall apart and your intentions are thwarted.

I have had it happen to me. It is a terrible place to be. Disappointment. Heartbreak. Uncertainty.

I suspect most of us have had such an experience, perhaps more than once. It might have been a relationship, or a direction for one's career. Our plans are made, our passions run deep, our intentions are significant and clear. And then it falls apart.

When that happens, how do we understand it, and how do we cope?

The writer of Acts does something in this passage that is almost imperceptible unless you are reading this book through at one sitting. And who of us does that? For 15 chapters, the book uses the point of view of a detached recorder of history.

Now in the tenth verse of the sixteenth chapter, the author shifts from third person to first person. Instead of describing what “they” are doing, the point of view shifts to what “we” are doing. The remainder of the Book of Acts is written from the first person point of view.

This has fascinated Biblical students for centuries. Many scholars propose that the writer of Luke-Acts joins Paul in his ministry at this point, and what transpires in the remainder of the book is a first person account. It is a tantalizing possibility corroborating details of Paul’s own accounts in his letters.

We don’t know for sure—this theory has many problems that Biblical scholars point out.

Another possibility I like to consider is that perhaps the author is using a literary technique. By shifting the language, he is inviting his readers to enter the story, to participate in the mission, to dream dreams, to consider their lives as being directed by the Holy Spirit, to encounter the world around them in an intentional yet uncontrollable fashion where God is actively involved and engaged in ways that are surprising. The story is not just about “them” and events that happened a long time ago; it’s about “us,” about God using you and me just like God used Paul.

And if it is true that the story includes us, perhaps our own disappointments about significant hopes can be viewed, as we look back on them, as God’s directing hand.

The author could have attributed Paul’s delay and redirection as the work of the devil. Paul is seeking to bring the Gospel message to others, and who but the forces of evil would prevent that? But he doesn’t say that. It is God who is in control of this venture, and the author names the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Jesus as being the powerful force that guides this story.

Could it be that such a force is guiding our lives?

It was in a vision, a dream at night, that Paul sees it: a man pleads with Paul, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Paul and his companions wasted no time

in setting their course, and arrived in Philippi, a major city in the district of Macedonia.

On the Sabbath, they sought out a gathering spot where religious people of the area might gather. It was outside the city gates, along the river.

And what transpires is like a comedy if you remember all the details of the players involved. The Apostle Paul has quite a reputation among Christians today as being, shall we say, “not much of a feminist.” The vision that motivated Paul to come to Philippi is of a man who pleads for help.

And who does Paul encounter there along the river bank? A bunch of women. I suppose Paul could have strolled along further to spy the man he saw in his vision. He could have asked the women gathered there, “Have you seen this Macedonian man, about yea tall with a short-cropped beard, asking for help?”

Instead, Paul engages conversation with these women who had gathered there for prayer. One woman in particular listened intently to Paul’s message about Jesus.

Her name was Lydia. We know little about her, but Acts tells us all we need to know. Lydia ran her own household and a very lucrative business. A woman in such a position was quite rare in those days.

She was strong and independent. As any successful businessperson would be, she was decisive and clear in her thinking. Men’s authority did not cow her into submissiveness. She could see through any paternalistic behavior that might come her way.

So here is this encounter between the Apostle Paul, known for his chauvinistic ways, and Lydia, the first century feminist. And the writer of Acts asserts that this encounter was the explicit will of God.

Given these personalities, the expectation of a reasonable outcome might be negative. Is this the prelude to another failure in Paul’s quest to proclaim the Gospel?

What happened is completely surprising. God opened Lydia's heart to the message of God's expansive love through someone she might disagree with when she got to know him well. And then Lydia opened the door of hospitality to Paul and his colleagues, and her home became their center of operations.

Perhaps Paul did not have all the prejudices attributed to him. Or, maybe he did, yet in fulfilling God's direction, Paul had his eyes opened to a larger reality.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ was breaking boundaries. The boundaries between Gentile and Jew had just fallen. Perhaps we are seeing in this story the very shift in perspective that Paul would later record in Galatians 3:28. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Jesus Christ."

Frederick Buechner writes: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*)

It was Paul's deep gladness to share the Gospel; it was such a passion that propelled him forward when circumstances seemed to stand in his way. And God may have surprised him when the deep hunger he encountered in the world was an independent European woman named Lydia.

God has a wonderful sense of humor!

If you want to grow in your faith, put yourself in God's hands and put yourself into the lives of others. The "other" who is out there in the world may be quite different from the one we expect. God and life are full of surprises.

What happened to Paul was an accident. It wasn't supposed to go like it did.

Or was it?