

“Not Who You Expected” – Acts 16:9-15 – Easter 6 – May 13, 2007

It was a dark and stormy night. Actually, it wasn't, but I've always wanted – like Snoopy – to begin writing with that phrase. Well, even to say it wasn't dark and stormy may not be accurate either. The truth is while we do know it was night we don't know what the weather was like when Paul had his vision. Those details haven't been included. Mind you, plenty of other details have been included in the reading from Acts, and the details that are there are fascinating.

The first was the detail I mentioned already – it was night. Most biblical visions seem to come at night, which makes some sense. During the daytime we are usually totally preoccupied with ourselves, with our business, our school, our family, our friends, the news, sports, whatever – and we have precious little attention left for God. At night, however, things calm down a bit, and we are much more open to seeing what God wants us to see, and hearing what God wants us to hear. And so it was at night that Paul had a vision, complete with some crucial details. “There stood a man of Macedonia...” Again, the author assumes that we would know how Paul knew this was a man of Macedonia – perhaps it was the moustache, more likely it was the ethnic costume. Some ethnic costumes are quite recognizable even today. For example the Scottish kilt, or the Korean hanbok. For a Macedonian in Paul's day it was most likely a Greek peasant shirt and a short blue and white skirt. In any event, it was a man from Macedonia and he was pleading for Paul to come to Macedonia and help them.

This had to be an appealing vision for Paul, because he and his helpers – Timothy and Silas – hadn't been having much success in Asia Minor. This could be because they were busy laying down the new church law – or as the text (16:4) puts it, “As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem.” Sounds a bit like a visitation from Presbytery, doesn't it?! No wonder they weren't having a lot of success, although we are told that the churches “were strengthened in faith and increased in numbers daily.”

In any event, the invitation to proceed to Macedonia came to Paul in a vision – at night – and they set sail from Troas. Lots of interesting details here about the trip which brought them to Philippi, and these details always grab me, and drag me into the story. There's a tendency when reading a story like this one to think of it being a bit like Star Wars, namely “long, long ago and far, far away.” We read that they set sail, and tend to think it was some isolated little boat that they were on. But in reality, that part of the Mediterranean was a throbbing hive of commercial activity. When we read that they “took a straight course to Samothrace” we should hear that they took the super ferry route instead of the local. Think of a cobalt blue sea with a thousand white sails, little boats and big ships heading in all directions. Paul and his helpers took a major sea route, one that was bustling with passenger and cargo ships carrying olive oil and wine and cloth and metals and all the goods that were part of a pulsing economy. They wound up in Philippi which was the provincial capital of Macedonia, and from that we know it was a city alive with markets and major businesses, and they remained there for some time.

Now there's a lack of details, isn't there? Aren't you curious as to what happened during those days? Wouldn't you love to know what they were doing, how they spent their time, why it took some days to get established? I would! But we don't have any of those details and that leaves me for one feeling that nothing reportable happened during that time. However, we do have a couple of stories of what did eventually happen in Philippi and our text today is the first of those. You'll recall from the reading that Paul and his associates went outside the city gates on the Sabbath, down by the river where they thought there might be a place of prayer. It seems their guess about the place of prayer was correct, for there were women gathered there, and the visitors sat down and talked with them. We are

introduced to a woman that was in the group and who responded to them, and this is where the details get really fascinating.

We are told the woman's name – Lydia – and while her name is not unusual, the very fact that we know it is most unusual. Not many of the believers are named in scripture. We are also told that she was a worshiper of God. What I find really interesting is that she is not Macedonian – she is from Thyatira, a city in Asia Minor, in the region where Paul and his gang have just come from, and thus she is a foreigner. An important foreigner to be sure, as she not only owns her own business, but a business as a “dealer in purple cloth.” Since only nobility could legally wear purple in the Roman Empire, this meant that she dealt with the high-end crowd – the equivalent of owning a Gucci or Armani franchise. She was obviously wealthy, and that's confirmed by the fact that she owned a villa as we learn both that her entire household was baptized but she offered the hospitality of her home to Paul and his entourage.

This story of the conversation of Lydia is a wonderful story of developments in the early church, of spreading the good news of Jesus Christ and of acceptance of that good news. But there is also another conversion happening here and this may be the real heart of the story. This is also a story of the conversion of Paul. I know, we think of the Road to Damascus as the defining event in Paul's conversion, and it was, but it really started a process that continued here and comes to full fruition while he is writing his letter to the Romans.

Recall Paul's vision – who was it that appeared in the vision to plead for them to come to Macedonia? That's right, a man of Macedonia. Now Paul was already ministering to the Gentiles, because that's what business was about delivering the ordinances for observance from the elders in Jerusalem. Remember Peter's vision of the sheet with all kinds of animals, and his revelation that the good news of Jesus Christ was for Gentiles as well? Well, the church offices in Jerusalem had made that policy, and through Paul and others were delivering letters to the churches telling them that Gentiles were welcome. So for Paul to see in a vision a Gentile pleading for him to come was not necessarily a surprise to him. However, when he got to Macedonia, who did he meet? That's right, the person who responded to him was not whom he expected – instead of a man like in his vision, the person who responded to him was a woman, and a foreigner at that. If Paul had had any reservations about his calling to proclaim the gospel to all, this event had to put those reservations completely to rest. And God bless him, that seems to be the case, for Paul – and think about how difficult this must have been for him to do given his background as a Pharisee – sat down and talked with the women, and a church was born in Philippi.

Perhaps this can be a story not only of Lydia's conversion, not only of Paul's conversion, but a story of our conversion as well. Not the ‘conversion’ that most people think of when thinking of Christianity, but a shift in our faith as we recognize that as we are called to proclaim the good news to people they may not turn out to be who we expect either. We may think we know to whom it is God is calling us to proclaim our faith in word and deed, but just as Paul met Lydia seemingly by accident God will help us to encounter totally different people. Will we be as open to adjusting our understandings as Paul was? With God's help we can be. Will we be willing to sit down and talk about our faith with those whom we would not previously have associated? With God's help we will.