

### **“Vision of [a New] Reality” – Acts 16:9-15 – Easter 6 – May 9, 2010**

It was a dark and stormy night. Actually, it wasn't, but I've always wanted – like the dog Snoopy in the Peanuts cartoons – 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 are not given to us, but 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...” Apparently 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, or whatever Greek men's skirts are called. In any event, Paul's vision featured 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. Perhaps this was due to the fact 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.” Bill Easum, a ‘companion’ at the Emmaus Project, would be ranting should he read this text – he has no use for polity or committees.

In any event, the invitation to proceed to Macedonia came to Paul in a vision – at night, naturally – and the three of them 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. We suffer from 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. Think perhaps of pictures you have seen of the Thames docks in London in the nineteenth century, or Halifax, or Boston – you get the picture! When we read that they “took a straight course to Samothrace” we should hear that they took the express liner or super ferry route instead of the local tramp steamer. 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 grain 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, eh? Aren't you at least a bit 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 sadly 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 helpers 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. That's amazing enough in itself – remember Paul is a reformed Pharisee, and it probably wasn't easy or natural for him to talk with women. But then 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 official policy, and had Paul and others 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, whom 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. Paul's vision was not of something unreal, but was instead when lived out was a vision of a new reality within the church – neither Jew nor Greek, neither Macedonian nor Thyatirian, neither male nor female, God's grace is for all.

At the Emmaus Project last weekend we had the opportunity and privilege of both hearing learned speakers and conversing with fellow elders and clergy about visions for the church. Unlike Paul's experience the visions came both at night and during the day, but like Paul's the visions at the Emmaus Project seem to offer the possibility of the church responding to a new reality – namely the cultural context in which we live. Paul may have set out to find the man in his vision (one

hesitates to say, “man of his dreams”) but quickly adapted when he discovered it was women in general and a foreign woman named Lydia who were receptive to becoming the core of the new church in Philippi.

And there lies what I believe is the essence of this story from Acts – a concrete example of how the church grew from adapting a vision to a new reality. So, what’s our vision? What’s your vision? When you close your eyes and dream, what does your church look like? Good! Now, what was the one component that transformed Paul’s vision into a reality? Yes, Paul and his two associates got up, got out, got going into the world and through sitting down and talking with people helped transform Paul’s vision into a reality. Granted, the reality turned out a little different than the vision, but in a good way. The message in this little episode seems clear enough, that with a little effort, and a lot of help from the Holy Spirit, our visions can indeed turn into realities. Dare to dream ... and then dare to do!