

“Follow The Vision” – Acts 16:9-15 – Easter 6 – May 1, 2016

It was a dark and stormy night. I've always wanted – like the dog Snoopy in the Peanuts cartoons – to begin writing with that phrase, but to be completely accurate I can't really say it was dark and stormy. Truth be told, while we do know it was night we have no idea what the weather was like when Paul had his vision. The author didn't give us those details, but did provide plenty of other details in our 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 business, our school, our family, our friends, the news, sports, politics, and usually ourselves – 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 were 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 the kind of church that the Reformers rebelled against some fifteen or sixteen centuries later!

But then 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. And then 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 water taxi. Imagine 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 riverside 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 especially since 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 an alien, a foreigner. An important foreigner to be sure, as she not only owns her own business, but owns 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 government contracts and/or 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 and also that 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, who did he meet down by the riverside? That's right, the person who responded to him was not who he expected – instead of a man like in his vision, the person who responded to him was a woman, and a foreigner at that – not even a Macedonian! If Paul had had any reservations about his calling to proclaim the gospel to all who would hear, 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 appeared real and normal to him, but when he lived it out he was presented with a new vision – a vision of a new reality within the church. This new vision that became a reality showed a church that should not discriminate – neither Jew nor Greek, neither Macedonian nor Thyatiran, neither male nor female; a church that would proclaim that God's grace is available for all who would seek it.

As important as that new understanding was to Paul and his two associates – and indeed still is to us today – there is yet another insight to which we need pay serious attention. That insight is the subtle yet powerful understanding of where this took place – to be specific, "down by the riverside." Paul and his helpers didn't focus on setting up great alternative worship services in the

synagogue. It seems clear from the story that they didn't sit in a rented church hall waiting for people to drop in to join in worship. Instead, they got up and got out and met the people of the community in the community. The church in Canada over the last one hundred years fell into the trap of believing itself to be at the centre of the culture, of becoming the 'official' religion. People were expected to attend church, and the church expected people to come in through the doors. With the new-found freedom in society after two world wars this 'official church culture' collapsed, and people no longer respond to social intimidation to be part of the church. Of course the church has acted in predictable ways to the resulting decline in church attendance: some have taken the "let's get sterner and harsher" approach with limited success; others have gone the "let's put on a bigger show" route, with what seems like good success at first but which is now fading.

However, an increasing segment of the church is beginning to catch the vision that Paul and his helpers discovered, and is returning to a more basic and yet more powerful implementation of the gospel through going out into the world and sitting down and talking with people in the community. The most powerful way to help people to understand the power of God's extraordinary love is to show them God's love lived out in ordinary ways by ordinary people.

So, how do we go "down by the riverside" here in the West End? Well, we've done that already through ministries such as the Community Breakfast and all the other ways we connect with our community, and we hope to do more so with our new facilities. But as we move to bring our vision into reality we need to remind ourselves constantly that what is important is not the new building itself but what it will enable us to do by way of reaching out to people in our community. We have a vision of being better able to provide a safe place for people to meet; a place where hungry people can be fed and where those in danger of losing their home or community can find an affordable place to live. Our vision includes providing space where people can heal and reintegrate into their community; a place where people can come out of isolation to gather and socialize. And yes, a place where people can connect or re-connect with God through worship, contemplation, prayer, and best of all, service.

Granted, the details of the reality will likely turn out to be a bit different from our vision because the Holy Spirit continues to bring us delightful surprises, but even so we continue to dare to dream, to catch ... and then dare to do, with God's help.