

Moving on with God
[written in oral style]

Acts 16:(1-8) 9-15
Easter 6, Year C

May 22, 2022
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Have you ever been in a situation when things are not going as desired...or... you do not have a clear plan?

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In times like that we pause and wonder, "What next?"

And, we search for strength and direction.

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Acts, written by Luke, presents many of Paul's journeys, often stumbling his way forward.

Today's story is preceded by surprising twists and turns.

Paul planned to visit some of the new churches, but had a disagreement with Barnabas.

So, they split and went separate ways.

Paul and Silas continued travelling in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey.

While visiting some believers in Lystra, they met Timothy and were impressed with him.

Timothy, a new believer, was Greek.

They invited Timothy to join them.

Keep in mind, at this point, most of the believers in Christ were Jews, and they still valued their old customs.

Being sensitive to that, Paul insisted Timothy be circumcised.

Ouch! Children, ask your parents about this later. 😊

I imagine the surgery slowed down the pace of their walking from town to town.

The plan was to share the encouraging decisions made at the Council of Jerusalem. The nascent [na sent] churches were inspired and strengthened by these visits of support.

Paul and his entourage were itinerant preachers, Yet they did not feel inspired to preach the Gospel.

When they finished visiting the new churches, they wanted to out and proclaim the Good News.

Yet, verse 6 states that God's Spirit forbid them to preach.

That is strange.

They did not know what to do or where to go.

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Near the town of Mysia, they considered their options.

Paul Googled various places to visit.

Bithynia was near by, but both Yelp and TripAdvisor provided poor reviews.

They chalked that up to the influence of God's Spirit telling them to not go there.
Yet, they did not know where or how to go.

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Troas, also known as Troy, a city on west coast by the Aegean Sea, had a recommended  
AirBnB. So, they went there for the night.  
They were perplexed and somewhat anxious about "what next."

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This is where things got interesting.
During the night, Paul had a vision. It was not a dream; it was a vision.
A man from Macedonia stood in front of Paul strongly persuading they to go to Macedonia.

I think a message that is strongly felt, a deep in the soul sensation is a "Vision."

This vision is remarkable in two ways.

One, Macedonia is in Europe; it is north of Greece.
Europe!
That's a radical leap to go to Europe to proclaim the Gospel.

The second surprise is that Macedonian man had to be Luke himself.
The narrative, from that point on, switches to nominative plural.
It was "they" did/went and suddenly becomes "We".

Luke jumped into the story in a very significant manner.

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Luke was actually from Antioch, yet he lived many years in Philippi, the leading city in  
Macedonia.  
And, Luke loved Macedonia.

Apparently, Luke was so persuasive that they discerned that he was inspired by God, that God  
was calling them to Europe.

So immediately, they had a plan and a purpose.  
No longer frustrated and perplexed, they got on the next ferry and sailed to Europe.  
There is a message in this.

Paul, Timothy, and Silas seemed like they were at the end of the road with no where to go.  
They did not know what to do.

Then suddenly, a new radical option is received and embraced.  
They could sense it was God's doing.  
From a dead-end, a new path / a new way opened up.

Moreover, that new way required crossing boundaries.  
They were leaving behind the old safe domain.  
They were empowered to cross boundaries.

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What can we learn from this?

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The four hopped from town to town until they arrived in the big city of Philippi.

They were “winging it”. No plan. Just trusting in God for the “what next.”

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Insightfully, they went to a “Place of prayer” on the sabbath.

Hellenistic Jews were small groups and did not have a physical synagogue.

The “place of prayer” was their outside synagogue.

Paul going there is insightful because they could relate well with the Jews. They had common stories. ~~~~~

I saw this approach applied when I was pastoring in Ohio.

At a ministers’ breakfast, I met a Southern Baptist church planter. He came to the area by himself, with no connections or seed families.

I asked him how he started the church.

He said that he would hang out at the grocery store. He would watch what people were buying and listen for Southern accents.

He knew that if they were from the South, then they would know about Southern Baptists and he would ask them to help start a church.

Clever.

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At the Jewish gathering, Paul and the others preached the Gospel to the women.

Jewish converts were mostly women.

No need to wonder why.

Remember what Timothy went through.

Children, be sure to ask your parents later. 😊

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A certain woman named Lydia was intrigued by what she heard them proclaim.

She was a trader in purple cloth.

This was a way of saying she was very affluent.

Purple dye was extremely expensive. It was derived from the Murex Sea Snails. Thousand of snails were needed and the processing was tedious and costly.

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The text states that God opened her spiritual heart--her mind and soul to hear what Paul was saying.

**I think there is a lesson in this, maybe more than one. ??**

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Lydia accepted the Gospel message. She accepted Christ as her saviour / as the model for living God's way.

Lydia,....a woman,...was the First European believer in Christ.

This is radical. This is Crossing boundaries!

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She was just the beginning.  
Her family believed also and her whole household was baptized. There were countless more after that.

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The Gospel was proclaimed / the way of Christ was presented to those who were unfamiliar with it.

Then, God enables / prompts reception, and one believes.

Did I mention the Gospel is proclaimed to those outside of the church?

Maybe there is a lesson in this?

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We know the stories of Jesus. We know his life and message and that it is the way of God for us.

Yet, how / why is it so powerful and appealing?

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I will paraphrase Jordan Harrell. She is a book writer and blogger.

She states:

Genocide is biblical

Loving enemies is biblical

But only one is Christ like.

Slavery is Biblical

Chain-breaking is Biblical.

But only one is Christ like.

Patriarchy is Biblical

Counter-cultural elevation of women is Biblical

But only one is Christ like.

Violence is biblical
Grace filled restoration is biblical.
But only one is Christ like.

Christ transforms. The way of Christ liberates.
The way of Christ is inclusive.

God opens our spiritual eyes to understand God's will / God's better way for us.

Moreover, God's way is a faith journey / trusting God, each day, to lead the way.

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Lydia quickly embraced hospitality, as Luke puts it, "Prevailed upon us" to stay at her home while in Philippi.

*I am sure she had a lovely home.*

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In faith, Paul and the others followed God. They tuned into God's Spirit, and God provided for them.

When all seemed dismal, as if they reached a dead-end, a new way opened up.

Boundaries were crossed. New things happened.
And, they had a nice, safe place to live.

Trusting God one day at a time invites possibilities and surprise.

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I chose "How Firm a Foundation" as the response hymn because today's story reminded me of a story from my past.

It is a year after I graduated.  
My seminary had just fallen to the mean-spirited conquest from the fundamentalist, extreme right wing.

I talked about this take-over last fall.

The tender-hearted President, Roy Honeycutt, was summarily fired and most of the professors were about to be dismissed.

The faithful gathered on the front steps of the chapel.  
The chapel building was huge, likely could seat 2-3 thousand.  
It was typical, southern colonial architecture—red brick, a grand white steeple, and tall marble pillars.

We the faithful, professors and students, stood on the front steps.

The faithful were those who clung to the way of grace, peace and love.  
The faithful eschewed judging others and being exclusive.  
The faithful were not legalistic, nor literalists.  
The faithful tried to simply live by faith, trusting in a loving God, even if it meant crossing boundaries.

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However, as it was for Paul, the path ahead seemed to be a dead-end.
We could no longer serve and proclaim in our denomination.
Professors were losing their jobs. We would all be dispersed.

We gathered in the thick air of dread and despair.

Someone began to sing "How Firm a Foundation".
Most hummed along until the third verse.

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I think the heavens opened up when we sang the last line,  
"I'll never, no never, no never forsake."

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This turned out to be just the beginning and not the end.

We were all dispersed.
Professors and students went far and wide and to various denominations to proclaim the God of love and grace.
Boundaries Were Crossed!

A new beginning needs an end.

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I became a Mennonite, and I try my best to present the loving God who is trustworthy / who provides a new and better way.

With the Gospel illumination, we see God is accepting and freeing.  
God saves.  
God do not care about the tone of one's skin.  
God accepts all no matter their gender, sexual preference, identity or orientation.  
God shows us a better way.

God is love. That about says it all.

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