

# New Possibilities

Sixth Sunday of Easter

## Acts 16:9-15

<sup>9</sup> During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." <sup>10</sup> When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

<sup>11</sup> We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, <sup>12</sup> and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. <sup>13</sup> On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup> A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. <sup>15</sup> When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

Our scripture this morning is about God using new possibilities and models of work within the early church. The script was being written anew. The ways we assume things work are not the ways God works in our lives. Just the minute we think we have God figured out God surprises us by doing something different than we expect. Such is the case with the way God used a vision and an unknown woman to start a new ministry in Europe!

We know almost nothing about Lydia, but what we know fascinates us. Who was this woman making her way independently in a world run by men? Who was this Gentile who sought the God of Judaism? The text tells us only that she was a "seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God." However, in just those two phrases, Scripture with its stunning brevity show us that work and worship both had their place in the life of this remarkable, busy woman.

So she rises from the text and stands before us even today as a kind of narrative icon, contemplative Mary and active Martha in one, her heart set on God even while her work gets done. She shows us new possibilities!

She came to the riverside, to a secluded place of prayer. Perhaps she expected to meet other women, Jewish worshipers or Gentile seekers, for prayer together. Perhaps she came regularly. What she did not know was that on that particular day outside the city gates, she would be met by Paul and his companions, missionaries looking for anyone who was seeking God in that hidden place of prayer. There at the riverside, Lydia found the God who was finding her.

It almost did not happen. Recall for a moment all the contingencies of history, that long list of improbable events that led to Lydia's encounter with Paul. Think back to the controversy in the early church over the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 15) or how Paul had to be nudged and redirected again and again to get him to Philippi (16:1-8). It was not enough for the Spirit to guide Paul and his companions. Twice the text tells us that the Spirit prevented Paul from going the wrong way (16:6-7). We can only imagine what it is like to have the experience of the Holy Spirit stopping us from doing something. But the Spirit knows how to take advantage of new possibilities!

Then, of course, there is Paul's vision of the "man of Macedonia" who pleaded for help. Only when Paul discussed the vision with his companions do they conclude that they must go to Philippi, and they left immediately. Did they ever meet the "man of Macedonia," or was Lydia the one to whom the Spirit was guiding them? New possibilities????

It almost did not happen, that meeting of the businesswoman and the missionaries, and it surely would not have happened were it not for the inexplicable convergence of human faithfulness and divine guidance. Paul and Lydia and the Holy Spirit all worked together in this event, this "chance" encounter

by the river. Paul would not have been guided to this place at this moment, were he not first of all at God's disposal, open to being guided, sensitively attuned to being steered in one direction and away from all others. He was opened to new possibilities! Lydia would not have arrived at that place or time, had she not first of all been a worshiper of God, a seeker already on her way; and open to new possibilities.

Paul did his part and Lydia hers, but it was God who guided all things and worked in and through all things, not just for good but for what would otherwise be impossible. It was the Spirit who brought Lydia to Paul so that she could hear the gospel.

However that was only half of what was required. True, Lydia had first to hear the words of good news, and to do that she had to meet Paul. She also had to hear the words as truth, as gospel, as the answer to her search. It was the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ who prepared Lydia's heart to hear, receive, and understand. "The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul" (v. 14).

Here is the center of the story, the moment of intersection between human obedience and divine initiative. Longing and grace meet there on the bank of the river. The longing heart of a faithful woman was opened by the gracious impulse of a faith-giving God in an action that, like the incarnation itself, is at once fully human and fully divine. Like Lydia we are astonished when, looking back, we can say only that our steps were guided and our hearts opened.

Lydia was baptized and her household, the text tells us almost in passing (v. 15). Then she opened her house as a base for Paul and his companions, insisting that they stay there while continuing their work in Philippi. In fact, she attached a condition to her request that made it difficult for Paul to say no. Come and stay, she said, "if you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord." How could Paul argue with that? More than hospitality, however, was at stake. By hosting the

missionaries, she became one of them, a new convert already in the business of converting others. We can only imagine how many heard the good news while gathered at Lydia's house.

God opened her heart, and immediately she opened her home. Apparently without any hesitation, she was baptized and turned her house into a base for the spread of Christianity in Europe. Almost as if in a single action, her faith led to baptism, which issued immediately in hospitality and in sharing in all the risks of the mission enterprise. What is remarkable for us is how decisive Lydia appears to be. Unlike so many of us, she saw the truth before her and decided what course to take, and it was done.

Lydia was decisive because she was discerning, able to see through the events on the surface to the deeper workings of God's Spirit. She was discerning because God had opened her heart to a new level of perception, to new possibilities. God had given her the ability to perceive because she came to worship. She came to worship because she was hungering for something more in life, something beyond the commercial success she had apparently achieved. She was hungering for more because that restless Spirit, who is surely in us all before we ever know it, had stirred up a holy longing in her soul. Every step of the way, the Spirit prompted and called and blessed her and, through her, blessed us. **Ronald Cole-Turner**

Lydia becomes a model of spirituality and leadership. Lydia listened eagerly and was baptized, and she continued to take an active role by inviting the visitors to come and stay in her home. The force of her invitation was noted in the concluding verse: "And she prevailed upon us" (v. 15).

The centrality of worship is confirmed by the important role of the place of prayer outside Philippi. It became a gathering place where the missionaries could share their message. Those who bring good news have the opportunity to go outside the city in order to find a place of prayer. How do we identify the places

where people are waiting to hear the word? In our visions, do we hear the calls to come over, and do we have courage enough to cross over and help? When we do, we may well find our mission field and our best listening partners. **Richard M.**

### **Landers**

God continues to present us with new possibilities. Will we accept the challenge and be used by God?

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