

Faith Mennonite Church
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Following the Holy Spirit's Lead
Acts 16:9-15; John 14:23-29

During the night Paul had a vision. That's how our text from Acts begins this morning. Now visions weren't a new sign of the resurrection. Visions were considered ordinary. Throughout the biblical narrative we have stories, one after another, of people receiving messages from God through dreams and visions: Moses had his burning bush, Abraham and Sarah heard a call to travel, the prophets saw a clear vision of newness and hope even when the world was crumbling around them, Mary received the news that she would be a God-bearer, Joseph, dreamed that he should accept what was happening to Mary...

Visions were ordinary. But there was something new about the resurrection that propelled the early Christian followers to move out and share their new understanding of God's work in the world through the life, death, and new life of Jesus. This new life was not ordinary and it was not predictable!

Today in organizational life—whether in churches, businesses, or non-profit organizations—we frequently use the vocabulary of “vision” and “mission.” What we mean by those words, in our institutional contexts, is something *we've* defined, something *concrete and measurable*, something that keeps us on track. This is rather different from the visionary leadership of the Holy Spirit that we find recorded in the book of Acts. The apostles, Paul, Peter and others, were clear about their intentions: to share the good news. But the way that got accomplished was a work in progress.

In the first eight verses of Acts 16, we find Paul obstructed from proceeding in a direction he desired to go. In verses 6 and 7 we find that they were “forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia,” and that when they “attempted to go into Bithynia,” the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. Then comes Paul's vision of a man in Macedonia asking for help. Not Asia, but Europe. And when they get to Philippi, there's no mention of an actual encounter with this man, but Paul finds a group of women. One of them Lydia, becomes not only the first Christian believer and follower in Europe; she quickly takes on the role of a leader.

This story of Paul's arrival in Philippi and the conversion of Lydia is rather brief and without a lot of detail, yet the brief snapshot gives us a lot to consider for our lives as followers of Christ in the 21st century. This story encourages us to a) be open to new directions of the Spirit, b) to trust that God is already working in whatever situation we're drawn into, and c) that those whom we think may need our help may actually become our helpers and our leaders.

New directions of the spirit. I'm not here to criticize mission, vision and value statements; I think they can be very helpful to us. In our Council and Commissions retreat in February, we undertook a very helpful exercise of comparing our written statements about who we are as a congregation with what we're actually up to. We couldn't do such an evaluation if we hadn't done the prior work of defining who we wanted to be. But those statements are no substitute for an on-going search and an openness to the surprises that the Spirit might bring to us. And, in fact, in that exercise back in February, we actually noted new activities that aren't in our written documents. Change has occurred; the Spirit has led us in new directions!

God is already working in new areas we enter. But we're never led into a direction in which God isn't already there. When Paul and his companions entered Philippi, they didn't have to start from scratch. There was a group of worshippers, albeit on the margins, gathering outside the city gates along the river. This suggests that there wasn't a large Jewish community in Philippi, like there was in some of the other cities that Paul traveled to, but there was a seed of what would become a church.

When we made the decision as a congregation back in 2008 that we would hire a part-time ministry staff person to help us become better connected in the community and to better develop our peace witness, we knew it was a longing, but we didn't know how this would unfold. Who knew that in fewer than two years, God would bring us not just one but two people from right here in this neighborhood whom we didn't know already had a connection to us! Michael Bischoff, a Quaker, had studied in the Eastern Mennonite University conflict transformation program and had almost as many connections in Seward as Dick Westby! Kathleen Remund had been worshipping in this building, with the Community of St. Martin, for some 20 years! God was already at work before we began this new direction!

Those whom we think may need our help sometimes become our helpers and leaders. In Paul's vision a *man* from Macedonia cried for help, but when Paul arrived at the place of prayer he found a group of women. It's interesting to wonder what it was about this group that led Paul to sit down and begin teaching them, rather than to simply pause to ask where the men were and then pass on. Lydia did desire help—help in deepening her relationship with a God she had been attracted to as a wealthy, independent, Gentile woman. But as quickly as she accepted Paul's message of God coming near and opening new possibilities through Jesus, and then entering this new community through baptism, she emerged immediately as a leader. She offered hospitality that we can only imagine was the beginning of a house church. And the church that developed in Philippi we know became a healthy church—not without conflict—but one which Paul could later write to with deep affection, affirmation, and joy!

This week the folks in the ISAIAH office, in our office/education wing, invited me to an information session they were holding. ISAIAH is an organization that organizes churches to work for justice in their communities by advocating for legislative change for affordable housing, transportation, health care, and immigration rights. We took a virtual tour that introduced us to some of the community leaders in Isaiah's work in the Twin Cities. Like Lydia, these were all people who needed help for a time but quickly grew into leaders.

The first woman we met was Margaret. Although she grew up in poverty, she managed through hard work to become a Lydia with an advanced degree, a good job as a research scientist, and a stable household. But then her idyllic world was shattered by the deaths of her closest family members and she plunged into despair, thinking life no longer had meaning. One day when she went to speak to her pastor at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church in West St. Paul, her pastor encouraged her to get involved in her community. She began organizing neighbors and they closed a drug house that had plagued the community for 30 years and got it renovated into an affordable housing unit. Margaret continues to organize, and she's now the treasurer for ISAIAH.

The next person we met was Arline, an Asian-American woman who grew up in an abusive family. That abuse diminished her sense of self-worth and she had little ability to trust in herself. She thought leaders were exceptional people. But after going to an ISAIAH training, she began making contact with her local council person and then her state representative, and over

time she has become recognized as an important voice from her community. Now the council person and her state representative contact her, to get the voice of the community and to solicit her help! She's now working to involve Asian-American churches in the work of ISAIAH and the issues in their communities.

The last person we met was Paul, an African-American pastor in North Minneapolis. Pastor Paul grew up in the south and when he moved to Minnesota his early experiences didn't give him much hope that churches could work across color lines or that systems of oppression would ever change. He had tried to make an appointment with the director of MNDOT to find out why more African American companies didn't get MNDOT contracts, but he was unsuccessful. Then he went to a community meeting organized by ISAIAH in which he complained that MNDOT wasn't fulfilling its obligation to contract work to women and persons of color. A state representative was present and heard him. The next week that representative arranged a meeting with Pastor Paul and the head of MNDOT. And this has led to his participation on a committee that regularly reviews MNDOT contracts to ensure representation of these groups in the contracting process. Pastor Paul also works with an ISAIAH committee that seeks to bring churches together across color lines.

We never know the direction that God's Spirit might take us, but we can be sure that if one way closes (as the door to Asia closed for Paul), God will lead us down another path. We will not enter uncharted territory for God will always be there *ahead* of us, drawing us in, already at work wherever we go. And when we hear a cry for help or assistance, let us be ready for the surprise that God creates helpers and leaders out of ordinary people like all of us.

Let us follow the lead of the Spirit!