

**God's World©**

Acts 16:1-10

July 22, 2012

Rev. Sharlyn Gates

Have you ever had times in your life when you really thought you knew where you were going with your life? You made plans that you carefully thought out? Maybe you even made a move, changed jobs, or made some other arrangements to your life that you believed were just right for you, and then it seemed like doors closed and you just couldn't make it work?

Over the years, I've had some of those experiences. It's been that way with life in general at times, but I especially realize that it's happened in my life as a believer – as a disciple of Christ.

When I was 10 years old, I heard a missionary speak about people in Africa who were in great need and about the work that the missionaries were doing there. At 10, I was deeply moved and felt a strong conviction in my heart to become a missionary as well. I told my mother that's what I believed God was calling me to be – a missionary in Africa. Someday I would go there and do God's work.

I remember the look on my mother's face. Now, my mom was a strong Christian woman, and she knew that I was a child of faith, but I was 10. And what I saw on her face was something like "Isn't that cute? She thinks she will be a missionary when she grows up." Kind of like at 10 I couldn't possibly experience that kind of calling from God.

Well, at 17, I experienced another sense of God calling me to missions and that time I resisted. I was in love and the thought of going to Africa or anywhere outside of the space my boyfriend was in was just too much for me – God calling or not.

It took a lot of life, a number of mistakes and wrong turns on my journey to get back to answering that call from God. When I finally did, it was first to go to seminary. My mother asked me what I was planning on doing with a seminary education. In my mind, I couldn't see the broad picture so I said, "probably to become a pastoral counselor, or a chaplain. Not to preach.

I worked hard at taking extra credits in counseling and doing a year's residency as a chaplain. And I answered the call on that journey to work at the Upper Room ministries too. I'll never forget when I told my program director there that I really knew in my heart that I had to be a pastor – I finally was seeing that vision where the Holy Spirit was leading – Tom took my hands and prayed a prayer of thanks for me and my work and his words stood out to me as he called me a missionary to the young people and the adults who worked with them in the youth movement I had directed!

At last, I had done the work of a missionary – not in Africa – but in my own country and in some other countries as well. It was the work along the journey to the greater vision God had for my life – to pastor a church – to dedicate my life to a small congregation, living among the people, yes, doing pastoral counseling but so much more – leading, loving, and – for Pete’s sake – even to PREACH!

My vision of the call to ministry seemed grandiose, I think, to my mother – when I was 10. But truly, God’s vision was so much broader, so much fuller than anything I could have imagined or planned.

In our story today about Paul and his journey, we see him and Silas, and the youth – Timothy – a very young person who Paul sees much potential in, who has been raised by his devout Christian mother – Lois, and his grandmother – Eunice.

And now, notice how the wording changes as Luke tells this story of Paul’s journey – he starts this segment out by talking about “they” – they went to Phrygia – they went down to the seaport of Traos.

But now, in that last paragraph he says “**we** went to work at once getting things ready to go to Macedonia. **We** knew now for sure that God had called **us** to preach the good news to the Europeans.

It seems that our author of Acts – the doctor and historian – Luke - has joined the group. Luke seems to be on the missionary journey now with Paul, Silas and Timothy. It now becomes first hand reporting.

And did you notice how the plans they made kept getting blocked? They wanted to go into Asia to preach there, but the Holy Spirit blocked that route. So they went to Mysia and tried to go north to Bithynia (modern day Turkey) but again the Spirit stopped them. We aren’t told how they were stopped, how God closed the doors on their plans or why. It seemed like good plans to them but apparently the time wasn’t right. More importantly, God’s vision was much broader and fuller than Paul’s.

Then, Paul dreamed of a man standing on the shore way across the sea, clear over in Macedonia (look on the map!) crying out for them to come and help them.

You’ve heard the expression “when God closes a door, he always opens a window?” Well, in this case, when God closed the doors to the preaching in other more nearby countries, he didn’t open a window – he opened an entire continent!

The missionaries went to Macedonia – to Philippi – one of the largest cities in that country – and preached, and started the church, and the good news spread like wildfire throughout what is now known as Europe. And within just a couple of hundred years there were tens of thousands of Christians throughout that country.

We are told in the last few verses of this story that, while in Philippi, Paul, Silas, Timothy and most likely, Luke, went to a meeting place where people gathered for a prayer and worship time – down at the river. It was there they met Lydia – a successful business woman.

We are told quite simply that Lydia listened with open ears and heart, she heard the good news of salvation – the news that Jesus is the risen Lord – and she believed.

Lydia heard her calling – the call of hospitality. She offered her home to the missionaries so they might have a place to live and work from. And with that offer the church was off and running.

What can we learn from this story? I think first and foremost we see how we, as believers, might have a plan that we think is a good one – with all good intentions. And we can get really down and disappointed when those plans don't work out. We might even get a little peeved with God; perhaps get kind of huffy – saying under our breath, “well, God, I wanted to do that for you! Seems like you could have helped me out just a little!”

But if we just wait and trust the Holy Spirit to be our guide – our Spiritual GPS, so to speak – we might find that God's world is so much bigger – God's vision for us is so much fuller than we could have ever planned.

Eugene Peterson, whose translation we are using in this Acts series, (The Message) says in regard to the church: “without God's vision, the world becomes small and selfish. With this vision the world becomes large and generous. Without the vision, the church reduces itself to repetitious programs and rituals.” In other words without God's vision we tend to become more inward, doing things for ourselves - instead of outward, instead of being focused on the mission outside our walls.

The Macedonian vision enlarges our capacity to enter into a fuller dimension of God's world.

One thing we can be sure of as Christians: we all have the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Christ in us. That Spirit will prevent us from going in the wrong direction (but we have to pay attention!); the spirit will allow us to go places we never dreamed, to do and accomplish things we never thought possible; The Spirit of Christ will always guide us, always assist us, will always inspire us to do our best for him and for the sake of His mission – God's amazing, far reaching world.

We must always be in prayer that our plans are being inspired by God's plan – in our personal lives and in the life of this community. We can be sure that the Holy Spirit is among us. And with the Holy Spirit, anything can happen – and it probably will!

Now to the Ruler of all worlds, undying, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever!

**Amen.**

*© Copyright 2012. All Rights Reserved*