

Acts 16:9 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." ¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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.

The Legacy of Lydia

Acts 16:9-15

Full disclosure. When I saw this passage coming up in the lectionary, I jumped at the chance to preach on it. Lydia is one of the most influential women in the early church, and we don't know enough about the women of the early church. We need to take every opportunity to be reminded that it wasn't just men who spread the gospel and built the church in the first century. **And**, my granddaughter, who was born on February 27th is named Lydia. How could I pass up the opportunity to preach about the woman for whom my granddaughter is named?

She lives in Philippi, a teeming city in northern Greece that is an international crossroads for business, politics, culture, and religion. It has a busy marine port, and land highways leading everywhere. Most everyone traveling between Rome and parts east goes through Philippi. And the first place the apostle Paul sets foot on European soil is here in this thriving Greek city.

After receiving a vision, Paul changes the course of his evangelistic mission, to "come over to Macedonia" to spread the message of Jesus. Very much a Greco-Roman city, Philippi does not have a synagogue, but those who do worship Yahweh gather on the Sabbath to pray. As in most cities, so too in Philippi, the place where they gather is beside a river.

When Paul goes to the river on the Sabbath, a group of women are there, and, Paul sits down to share the message of Jesus with them. Before he leaves, at least one woman has become a believer. Her name is Lydia, and although we do not know a great deal about her, what we do know tells us that she is a very unusual woman.

First, Acts tells us that Lydia is a worshiper of God. She is not a Jewish woman, but a Gentile who worships Yahweh. There were not many Gentiles who chose to follow the monotheistic religion of the Jews. The culture in which Lydia grew up had many gods, and to shift from that mindset to the worship of only one great God requires a very special kind of spiritual depth and courage.

Second, she is a very successful businesswoman who lives in Philippi because Philippi is the place where she can sell her purple cloth to exporters who then take it all over the world.

Purple cloth is expensive because the dye comes from a certain marine snail named *Bolinus brandaris*. It takes thousands of these snails to make enough dye for one yard of cloth, and you have to boil them, producing a really nasty smell along with the purple dye.¹ So only the wealthy are able to afford the purple cloth that Lydia sells. It is the pigment of royalty, the shade of status. And Lydia is the agent who sells the cloth to the wealthy people of the world.

This successful businesswoman has come down to the river to pray. And when this stranger named Paul tells them about a man named Jesus who has been raised from the dead, Lydia believes. Something moves within her, a spark of faith ignites, and she believes. And in believing, Lydia, seller of purple, becomes the first European Christian in the world.

We quickly learn a few more very interesting things about Lydia. She is the head of her own household. When she becomes a follower and is baptized, her entire household is baptized – no man is mentioned – this is Lydia's household, and she quickly opens her home to Paul and his mission team. In fact, she insists in a very interesting way that they stay with her. She says, "*If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.*" How do you say no to that? As Luke puts it, "*She prevailed upon us.*"

The more I know about this Lydia, the more I like her! She is a strong woman who runs her own very successful business, dealing with the production, sale, and distribution of a very valuable commodity, and yet, she is also a woman of great faith who takes time to pray to a God she did not grow up worshiping. At some point in her life, she learned of the God named Yahweh, and she was inspired to worship this unusual deity. She is a woman of faith so that, in spite of a busy life running her own household, and business responsibilities that included overseeing the employees who were busy collecting and boiling all of those thousand of snails, producing the precious purple dye, dealing with traveling merchants and sea-going vessels exporting her expensive product around the world, she takes time on Saturday morning to go down to the river to pray, and discovers what it is like to become the doorway through which Christianity comes to Europe.

¹ <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/in-ancient-rome-purple-dye-was-made-from-snails-1239931/?no-ist>

It all comes about by this amazing convergence of human faithfulness and divine guidance. As one writer puts it, *“Paul and Lydia and the Holy Spirit all work 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...in one direction and away from all others. Lydia would not have arrived at this place or time, had she not first of all been a worshiper of God. Paul does his part and Lydia hers, but it is God who guides all things and works in and through all things. It is the Spirit who brings Lydia to Paul so that she can hear the gospel.”*² As she hears and believes, she immediately responds by opening her house to Paul and his friends, and before long, a house church is born: the church of Philippi.

Later in his life, when Paul is imprisoned in Rome, he writes one of the most loving and eloquent of all his letters to the congregation in Philippi that undoubtedly includes Lydia. Perhaps they even continue to meet in her home. Picture Lydia as host listening to Paul’s words of greeting at the beginning of his letter:

“I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ... It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, ... For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.”

Nothing more is recorded in Scripture about this amazing woman named Lydia. At the end of chapter 16, when Paul and his friends leave Philippi, we hear of her no more. And yet, this strong woman who is at once a woman of deep inner faith and decisive outer action, who opens her home to be the base of operations for the first Christian congregation in Europe, no doubt plays a part in the spread of the Christian faith west and north. If you and I could trace our faith family tree back to Europe, back through Scotland and Switzerland, with Reformers John Knox and John Calvin, on back to Rome, perhaps even before Rome became the hub of the Christian faith, we might find that our roots go back to a spiritual mother who felt called to pray to a God by the river, and became the first believer in Jesus Christ on the European continent.

God has a plan to redeem this world, and Lydia is a part of that plan. A strong, busy woman who also listened to and nurtured her spiritual side. Sunday through Friday she dealt with servants, employees, shipping agents, and whoever boiled those smelly snails. But on the Sabbath, she went down to the river to pray, and God opened her heart to the truth of Jesus Christ. Two thousand years later, her name lives on as the first European who opened her heart and her home to the working out of God’s plan for the salvation of the world.

May we be so open that in the busy-ness of our lives, we still take time to pray and worship; to sense the Spirit’s movement within us, and to respond as quickly and decisively to welcome Jesus Christ into our homes and our hearts, so that someday someone else will look back and trace the path of faith from their home to ours.

Amen.

² Bartlett, David L.; Barbara Brown Bartlett (2009-10-12). *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Kindle Locations 16844-16850). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.