Faith Journey

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Acts 16:6-10

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There’s a story told of a farmer who wasn’t sure he was cut out for farming, so he asked God to show him a sign about what to do next. One day, as he plowed his field, the clouds seemed to form three letters G, P and C. The farmer interpreted it as an answer to his prayers. God must be telling him to “Go Preach Christ.” He went to the elders in his church and told them what had happened, believing God was calling him to preach. Since the minister was on vacation, they invited him to preach the following Sunday.

His sermon that Sunday was awful. It was long, tedious and virtually incoherent. He commiserated with the elders after the service. The farmer was confused about why the sermon didn’t go well. He was sure God’s sign was to “Go Preach Christ.” One elder offered another interpretation, “Maybe God was telling you, ‘Go Plant Corn.’”

I don’t know if this story really happened but it wouldn’t be the first time someone was confused about God’s direction in his or her life.

We find ourselves in chapter 29 of The Story. It’s an account of Paul’s second missionary journey. In the passage I read today, Paul and Silas are at a loss about where to go next. Don’t miss this little detail! The greatest missionary the world has ever known is confused about God’s direction for his life. Maybe you thought God would write His instructions in the sky to faithful people like Paul.

This sermon is for those of you who are confused about what God wants you to do with your life. You ask God for a sign but there is no indicator that your prayer has been answered. If this describes your predicament, this sermon has you in mind.

In Acts 16, Paul and his companions attempt to go north but “are kept from preaching the Word in the province of Asia” (16:6). They try to go south but “the Spirit of Jesus will not allow them go there also” (16:7). So, essentially they flip a coin and travel west to the city called Troas. That night, Paul has a dream in which a man begs them to come to Macedonia (think Europe) and help them (16:9). So, they set sail for Europe with the wind at their backs.
He travels to Philippi, a city of strategic importance in Western Europe. Paul’s practice in his missionary travels is to visit the local synagogue on the first Sabbath after his arrival. Since there aren’t enough Jews to constitute a synagogue in Philippi, he visits a prayer meeting by the river. Only a few women are in attendance that day. Paul must have been wondering why God has led them to this unpromising place.

One woman listens intently to Paul’s message. Her name is Lydia, a wealthy businesswoman from Asia Minor. She’s a textile merchant specializing in purple, the color of choice among the rich and famous. She opens her heart to Jesus. Luke tells us that Lydia and her whole household are baptized in the river. Lydia’s change of heart issues forth with her gracious hospitality. She turns her home into a bed and breakfast to accommodate these traveling missionaries.

Paul’s vision of a man from Macedonia who begs them for help results in the first convert in Europe who is an Asian businesswoman. Fancy that!

When they return to town, they encounter a slave girl known for her ability to tell fortunes. Her fortune-telling translates into money in the pockets of her owners. She assumes the role of a town crier by announcing to the people, “These men are servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved” (16:17). At first, Paul is cool with the free publicity. After a few days of her relentless shouting, Paul is convinced she has a demon and commands it to come out of her. Presumably, she becomes a follower of Christ also.

The owners of this clairvoyant slave girl are now livid with Paul. Their profits have been cast out with the demon. They play on anti-Semitic hostilities and pester city magistrates to flog Paul and his friends. Afterward, they are locked away in prison. Paul must be asking what God has in mind in leading them on this circuitous mission.

The prison jailor is a retired military man who’s as hard as nails. He locks them in the maximum security portion of his prison and fastens their feet in stocks. Late that night, Paul and friends are singing hymns in jail (I can’t say for sure whether they sang praise songs or traditional hymns). Suddenly, an earthquake rattles the prison doors open. It’s jailbreak time at the Philippian jail.
Jailors are held responsible for any prisoners who escape. Prison wardens are liable to the same punishment their prisoners would have suffered. The jailor is about to fall on his own sword when Paul’s voice pierces the darkness. He reassures the jailor that none of them have taken advantage of the situation to escape.

The jailor is blown away that his prisoners haven’t cut and run. He falls to his knees and asks, “What must I do to be saved?” (16:30). Paul doesn’t answer in terms of something to do. Rather he speaks of someone to believe in. “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved—you and your household” (16:31).

They conduct an impromptu baptism service for the jailor and his family. What a transformation in this tough-as-nails prison warden. He dresses the wounds of his prisoners and displays hospitality in much the same way Lydia did. The guy who used to serve them prison slop has become their generous host. How many times have we read in The Story that the people who experience God’s saving grace become grace-filled believers!

Like I said, this sermon is for any of you confused about your life and what God wants you to do. As a matter of record, I hate confusion. I love clarity.

Chris and I drove home from the Boston area yesterday, after visiting family. We noticed at the outset that our tire pressure gauge light was on, so we found a service station and filled the tires with air. An hour later, the same thing happened. One tire was especially low on air. It was now the middle of the day and I have to get back to preach this sermon. I couldn’t afford to stop and fix the tire. So, every hour we stopped to refill the tire with air. Sure, we had our smart phones and GPS, but they don’t tell you where to find the best service stations with up-to-date air machines to fill tires.

Like I said, I hate confusion. I love clarity. Why is it that we expect everything in life to go according to plan? What do we do when we are confused about what to do next?
Paul is confused about where to go on his second missionary journey. All the doors are closed to him. The Spirit prevents him from going north or south. We’re not told whether he is physically restrained or he has an inner impulse that forbids him to go there. God uses the circumstances of his life to funnel him to the place where he should go.

Paul must have had his doubts when he comes upon an unpromising prayer meeting. He must have wondered when he encounters this demented slave girl or is incarcerated in this strange city. Yet Paul possesses the unshakable confidence that whatever happens can serve to advance the gospel.

These three converts form the nucleus of a new church. By the time Paul leaves Philippi, at the close of Acts 16, a community of Christians has formed in Philippi, who met in Lydia’s home. Lydia must be wealthy since her home is large enough to accommodate a church that meets in her home (16:40).

Paul later writes a letter to this church in Philippi that is included in the New Testament. Paul writes this Philippian letter from prison. He was incarcerated on numerous occasions during his itinerant ministry. His letter anticipates that these new believers in Philippi will be discouraged at the prospect of his imprisonment. Notice how he describes his situation in his letter to the Philippians: “Now I want you to know, my brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel” (Philippians 1:12). Paul believes that everything, including his incarceration, can be used of God to further the gospel.

The three converts singled out in our story are an odd trio. One is a wealthy merchant who travels the world. One is a slave girl with zero social standing. One is a hardened military man who thinks nothing of taking prisoners with their backs bleeding, fastening them to the stocks and locking the door. Then he has the audacity to go home and sleep like a baby.

You couldn’t find a less homogeneous group to start a church. I’m trying to imagine these three converts sitting in Lydia’s living room for
Bible study and prayer. What do an Asian businesswoman, a slave girl who deals in the occult and a prison guard share in common? What do they talk about? Their faith in Jesus Christ is what joins them together at the hip.

God uses ordinary, common people to carry his extraordinary plan forward. God often picks the most unlikely people to carry his mission forward. Paul reminds his readers in his letter to the Corinthians that, “God chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise and the weak things to shame the strong” (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

Don’t overanalyze your immediate circumstances. Trust God to be at work in your present situation. There will be times when your life won’t make sense.

Take heart, my friend. If God’s will doesn’t make sense to you in the present moment, hang on for the blessing. God has your best interests in view. God wants you to prosper.