

Your Plans; God's Plans

June 13, 2010
Acts 16:6-15; 40

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One of the perpetual challenges of the Christian life is to keep seeing our lives from the divine perspective rather than as simply one thing after another.

Imagine being the director of a dramatic production whose vantage point is behind the stage. The audience sees only the two actors on the stage in conversation. The director sees the other actors “waiting in the wings,” and the stage sets to the side and the backdrops waiting to descend from above, and the fog machines and the blocking tape on the stage—not to mention the dramatic arc connecting the first scene and how the couple on stage in this one scene, and every other scene builds to the drama culminating at the end.

We just heard about this apparently chance encounter between Paul and Lydia. Not much to it, on the surface—from the human side. Something of a disappointment, in fact. The mighty Paul would probably prefer to be preaching in a sizable synagogue or to influential movers and shakers in front of the town hall or in the amphitheater or at least in the agora, the marketplace, in such an august Roman colony as Philippi. But no: he runs into a few outcast Jewish women meeting out in the bushes by the river Gangites.

But see it from the divine perspective! Paul has been directed to that place that morning. Lydia has been directed to her divine appointment. Their encounter changes Lydia's life; it surely encourages Paul and greatly strengthens his work; in fact their meeting changes the face of Europe and eventually, all the world.

How did God set up this scene, and how did it change the world? What are you and I supposed to do to discover and keep our divine appointments? How are we supposed to be changing the world, when it's all we can do some days to make it from morning to night; to avoid strangling some of people around us, getting totally demoralized about the political process and the sputtering economy and the state of the world, and eat the things we know we should?

I “Listen up!” This is what Paul did so well. He would never have been there that morning had he not been listening to the Spirit—and obeying, even when he absolutely did not understand the “why.” Paul had already established thriving churches; had traveled a thousand miles; had gone back to encourage churches he'd established. He is now traveling again, east to west thru what is now Turkey.

He has found a winning strategy in preaching the gospel; he wants to serve God more than anything!

He wants to set up churches again in the region of Galatia. No! In Phrygia. No! In Mysia. No! He keeps trudging on until he gets to Troas. All he wanted was to invite people to Jesus, into His Church...and all he hears is “No” from God. (You have to know the geography before you can understand his frustration. Troas is literally on the shore of the Aegean Sea. He is out of luck, out of land. What now?)

Have you felt this way? You will do anything you hear from the Spirit. Nothing has sounded clear, or clear enough, to direct you. You keep drifting, hoping...and the end of your options is nearing. What have you done wrong? Has God forgotten you? Does God not have a plan for you? Has God grown silent, or is there no God after all?

Paul was in that place. He kept moving ahead as best he knew, making himself available for God. He did not wait back in Antioch until the end was clear. And finally—not one day too soon, the Spirit sends a messenger, a vision to Paul: “Come on, help us over in Macedonia!” This is God's plan, not Paul's; Macedonia is across the sea and literally on a different continent. “Immediately,” though, Paul and his team—at least Silas and probably Timothy and maybe Luke—found a boat with space on it, headed for Neapolis, the seaport in Macedonia.

Paul had spent weeks, months, listening for God, moving ahead—without a clear end. We know he had been serious all that time because when the Spirit spoke, Paul jumped on board—even though it was probably a “next step” Paul had never considered. He had been listening all the way, even though uncertain all the way—and landed right there at the seaport at Troas where God and someone in Macedonia had need of him.

II “Show up!” This is what Lydia did so well. She showed up once again that Saturday morning o pray and worship with a handful of Jewish women. Was she their guest for the first time that morning? (We all start somewhere—the adventure of following Jesus back Home.) Had she been faithful every Saturday for months, for years? We don't know. (But if you're worshipping with us for the first time, look out!)

We do know Lydia is a thoroughly modern woman. She

is gutsy, independent, professional. She's an entrepreneur in a high-end business: she imports and sells purple dye, which was reserved for royalty and the well-to-do. No husband is mentioned—she's on her own. It would be much better for her business had she simply gone to the impressive pagan temple in town where all her customers were meeting. (Philippi was a historic and patriotic Roman city—many retired military leaders ended up there, and in the temple all the town would have been declaring that “Caesar is Lord.” But she chooses, as a “God fearer,” to cast her lot with those few Jews who were not even allowed to meet within the city limits. She must be serious.

She wasn't even Jewish—why did she keep showing up? Maybe she noticed that those Jews were honorable in business, and had never tried to cheat her. Maybe she noticed they loved each other and lived distinctively—according to their own morals so very different from everyone else's. Maybe she was attracted to their crazy belief in one God over all gods who chooses to approach us humbly, personally, faithfully, in love. Not only with a bigger hammer.

That morning started out as every other morning for Lydia...the alarm goes off; time to head off to worship... and it turns out there is Paul. “God opened her heart” to respond to the gospel. She couldn't cause the heavens to open and the angels to come near; she couldn't even generate warm feelings or transformation. But God did.

Her job was to show up, just as ours is—Sunday after Sunday. Whether we expect anything new to happen, God to speak, the Spirit to meet us. We show up on time, out of respect for God and our sisters and brothers, prepared to meet God; settled, eager, expectant. Eager to hear a word from God. We take our own inventory: “Lord, help me!” And sometimes God surprises us.

She had no idea when she left home that morning that there would be Paul and his friends; no idea the Messiah had come. That God has come into the world in Jesus; that God loves the small and the elderly and the overlooked and the underpaid just as much as the rich and powerful. That Jesus shows us God loves us enough to go to the cross and die for our sake—and that God raised Jesus from the dead! That Jesus invites each person onto His team, into His family, and into the holy opportunity to live for something and Someone so much larger than our own struggles to get thru the day. To be eternally transformed in the struggle until we'd scarcely recognize the one we used to be.

Jesus chose to make Himself known to her that particular morning: He offers Lydia a new future, a new purpose,

a new life—she is to be a new creation! (She could not expect it, command it, deserve it—but Jesus made Himself known to her that day.)

All this and more came when Lydia showed up.

III “Open up!” (Paul listened up; Lydia showed up.) This is what you and I and every one in Christ gets to do: be open to how God wants to deploy you.

One of the reasons we pray all the time is to seek the will of God “for own lives on a daily basis.” We wouldn't need to pray if God's perspective were the same as our own; if God were no more prescient or intelligent or aware. (We've already noticed how Paul kept wanting to do what he thought would please God—back over in Asia minor—and God the Spirit kept frustrating Paul's own plans.)

The geography behind Paul and Lydia's meeting in Philippi is too perfect: it makes you wonder about fate and free will. Lydia started out in Thyatira, back in Asia about 300 miles where Paul had wanted to go. Had he gone, he would have missed her—because God had already brought her to Philippi. But the angel, or the dream, or the vision nudged Paul to where Lydia would be. Without opening up to the Holy Spirit, none of this could have happened.

This sort of thing happens from time to time in the Bible: the Spirit moves one person in advance to intersect with another person to meet in a divine appointment neither of them expects. God having Cornelius send his slaves to Peter's home in Joppa the day before Peter has his vision changing his understanding of Gentiles like Cornelius. And the risen Christ appearing in His glory to Paul, overpowering and blinding him in Damascus. Three days later, Ananias, a disciple of Jesus praying and minding his own business is dispatched to go to where the still-blinded Paul is staying. Ananias thinks this Paul (Saul) might still be extremely dangerous—yet obeys God's direction. (Someone in Christ's new family has to go get Paul and welcome him in—Ananias it is.)

This sort of thing happens today. One of you has told me you were out for a December stroll in the CDM Christmas Walk in 2008 and received one of our cards, along with a smile and a genuine welcome, and you have been worshipping here ever since. Growing deeper in Christ.

Friday and yesterday I attended our UCC annual Southern California Nevada Conference gathering (every June the 135 or so local UCC churches all get together.) Yesterday our local churches called a new Conference Minister, and it's quite a story. A great story.

Pastor Felix Villanueva had been minding his own business, happily tending his flock in La Mesa, near San Diego. For two years the Conference Search Committee has been planning and meeting to find and call our new shepherd. A year or so ago Felix got a phone call from one who knows and loves this Conference. "Felix, you should apply for this position. I think God would like you to be Conference Minister." Felix was flattered, but went about his business in La Mesa. A few months later, independent of the first one, another who knows and loves this Conference and had also been praying phoned Felix. "Felix, please pray about applying to be Conference Minister. I think God would like you to be this person." By now Felix was getting nervous—who wants relocate to Altadena to be Conference Minister? (A cut in pay and magnitudes more headaches and hassles.) But Felix is a man of prayer, and a man to obey his Lord. He and his wife started getting serious with God about this—she has a very successful practice in the San Diego area, and the Search Committee in the end voted unanimously that Felix was the one God is calling. They called him and he and his wife said, "Yes."

I think we are in very good hands now.

There are people like Lydia all around us: eager to encounter God in Christ though they aren't in a church. People all around us age living out their day, trying to make it from morning til night, and Jesus is waiting to show Himself to them. But how will they believe if they have not heard? Whom shall God send—not to Philippi or Joppa or Damascus—but to Altadena, to the Christmas Walk or the Spirit Run or the Starbucks? Be open...

IV "Fire up!" Lydia sure got fired up! (Most of you were here Pentecost Sunday—we can still see the color of fire in the banners and ribbons, and the flame of the Spirit is not quenched—nor will ever be.)

Lydia hears what Paul has to say about Jesus—and she wants to be baptized, on the spot. When all of respectable Philippi is swearing "Caesar is Lord," Lydia is willing to go public: "Jesus is Lord!" She is willing to antagonize her clientele, perhaps lose her livelihood.

We hear nothing of those other women at the river. Why does Lydia get so fired up? We don't know. Maybe she had lost her husband and her heart was wounded. Maybe her husband was back in Thyatira and she had suffered the loss of a child. Maybe she was scared about the economy—the price of purple dye had exploded and she couldn't afford her inventory and no one was buying. Or maybe her business was going great and she couldn't keep up with demand. Maybe her heart is bursting with gratitude. We don't know. But many around us are

anxious, burdened, heavy-hearted.

We can guess she's pretty shrewd at summing up someone's character, dealing with the public every day. She must have trusted in Paul, then she trusted in Jesus! She knew she was created for a purpose; she must have recognized that in Christ she could be made whole; she could live for One higher than her own pursuits. Love always takes us out of our selves and our own personal pursuits: when she understood God's love for her in Christ her own business didn't seem so ultimate any more.

I'm not worried. Lydia was bold and decisive before she gave her life and future to Jesus; I'm not worried she turned into a mousy little "church lady." (In fact it happens with her just as it has happened with you: when you come into Christ you become more who God created you to be, not less. When we are tentative, scared, in bondage to our own appetites we become stunted in our development. The more courageously we offer our character and decisions and and fate and future to God, the more we grow. The more we grow into who we were created to be.)

I love what happens next. Lydia has her entire household baptized, and then she manages something the other churches and even the jailers and mayors and governors and Caesar himself never seemed to pull off. She looks Paul in the eye and invites him and his party to move out of the dirty hostel they're staying in and move into her home. She'll rearrange some of the bolts of fabric and vats of dye in the warehouse to find a place for them. "I've trusted you and your Lord Jesus; now please trust me and do me the honor of staying with me. ("If you judge us to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at our house.") Make my home your base as long as you're in town."

Five words: "And she prevailed upon us." Luke was laughing as he wrote that down: nobody ever prevailed upon Paul. (He was always sensitive about taking anything from the churches he worked in, so that his enemies could never accuse him of doing God's work for personal gain. He kept making tents, insisted always on paying his own way.) They've barely met, and Lydia "prevailed upon Paul." She was strong before, but after she is baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit, look out! She's strong in a new way: to insist upon supporting Christ and His Church. She becomes even more hospitable—first Paul and Silas and Timothy and Luke and then the entire church gather and meet in her home. Her entrepreneurial skills and her personal generosity have new inspiration and new focus. Jesus has given her new life—what else would she do with her talents and skills and gratitude?

Her generosity and boldness and strength provide a great end to this encounter by the riverside. We heard that after Paul and Silas had been beaten and jailed and set free (surely the local magistrate did not prevail upon Paul—Paul would not leave town until he had received a personal apology from the mayor!) The moment they were let go, they went back to Lydia's home where the local sisters and brothers, the church, were all together.

Lydia, the first follower of Jesus in Europe, was the backbone of this Philippian church from the beginning; her generosity and boldness and loyalty shaped it as long as Paul was alive. It was always Paul's favorite; it's the only church he could depend on to be financially supportive (he even bragged to the Corinthians about how amazing were his sisters and brothers in Philippi). He prayed for them all the time; when he got discouraged or despondent he would think of them fondly.

Keep straining to listen for the Spirit. (If it makes you feel any better, Paul seemed to get no response for the longest time—only when he absolutely needed to.) Keep showing up, on time and expectant, every Sunday within 30 miles, ready to be encountered by the risen Christ in a new way—who knows what might happen? Keep open to the appointments God has for you....right next to you.

A few weeks ago Trish and I flew back to Michigan for a funeral. God had an appointment waiting for me before we ever landed in Detroit. I sat between Trish and a young professional woman who kept to herself for the first two hours. (I was a little jealous she got the aisle seat, but I tried to smile anyway, then leave her alone.)

I guess she saw the Bible and the books I was marking up. "Are you a philosophy professor?" she asked. "No," I explained I'm a pastor—but I asked her questions just as you or anyone might. "Are you a spiritual person?" (Of course everyone believes they are.) "How do you understand God?" "How are things with you these days?" Maybe it was the "pastor card", but she was extremely eager to share with someone some of what she believed and some of where she felt stuck in her life. Apparently no one had much listened to what she thought about these big questions, and it happened that the Holy Spirit was obviously wanting to call some new things to her attention. She kept saying, "It's so amazing you're a pastor and you're sitting here." (She had plenty of things weighing down on her—and she did not know Jesus who promises to make light our burden.) Before we landed she literally said, "God must have wanted us to have this conversation because I was supposed to be sitting in a seat back there and I just asked to move here when I checked in."

People just like Lydia are all around us: wanting to encounter the living God more deeply, eager to have someone listen to their ideas about the Big Questions and take them seriously. Not much interested in "religion" or maybe even "church" but so ready to hear about Jesus from someone they might trust—so that they may also trust in Him.

We keep fired up in the Holy Spirit so that God may use us just like Lydia and that church that meant so much to Paul who did so much to change history. Our destiny may not be as dramatic as theirs—but no matter.

God has plans for us. We are the church! You are the Church as you obey the Director and keep your God-appointments wherever you go: in your business and in your shopping and in your partying. You are the Church in your worshiping together and inviting others into this household of faith so that they might always encounter the risen Christ here among us. So that we, too, might keep boldly inviting others: "If you judge us to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay with us."

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They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went to Troas.

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." 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.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, 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. 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. 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. 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...After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.