

Sermon, St. David's, Easter 6C, 5/22/2022, Acts 16:9-15 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

The season of Easter is drawing to a close. Next Sunday we will observe Ascension, and then the following Sunday will be Pentecost, kicking off the long green season that we will observe for months.

When these particular readings have rolled around in previous seasons of Easter, I have not preached about Lydia, because her story is so sparse. But I felt the Spirit calling me to say something about this story in Acts this year so spent much of the week scrounging for scraps in various commentaries. Connie even chided me for the mess of books on my desk at one point, before I closed the door between our offices so she couldn't see them.

This story starts with Paul having a vision. Last week, Peter had a vision in the Acts reading, and my husband said to me afterwards, "Why don't you ever talk about the visions that are in the Bible?" That's a fair question, and my answer is, because they make me uncomfortable. Modern day Episcopalians don't tend to swap vision stories at coffee hour. "Visionaries" means something else today: good leaders have visions of what companies can accomplish.

Or churches, of course. Church leaders are supposed to have visions, but by that we don't mean the kind of trances or dreams described in the book of Acts, but rather an idea of how we think the church should look, or how we think God wants the church to look. We pray, come up with a vision, and then work towards it. Events of the past few years, of course, have compromised our vision. The church looks different. We've felt called to become the church on the corner: that is, a church strongly grounded in this neighborhood, seeking to make this corner of God's kingdom holy. We still envision that, but now that so much happens online, we are now envisioning what it looks like to be "the corner church, wherever you are."

But I've rarely had visions like Peter and Paul: something that came to me in a trance or dream. But I have once in a while. Once I had a vision of a man who used to be a parishioner here, Ron Dale. He had died a few days before, and I was concerned because I didn't think Ron's funeral was going to look exactly like he would have envisioned, but he had not written his wishes down. I had a vision of him in this room, quietly straightening books in the pews, and he looked up and beamed at me. I knew that Ron was OK, and that what I thought would matter to him mattered less. What was left was love. He knew that he was loved.

So, in today's story from Acts, Paul, the convert, is going around trying to change the world for Jesus, and he has a vision: a man in Macedonia pleads with him to go Macedonia and help them. Paul has faith in this vision, so they set out immediately.

Notice that while a man in the vision had summoned Paul, what they come across was a woman. They went outside the gate by the river looking for a place to pray, but instead of finding the

Macedonian man from the vision, they came across women. Several women, apparently, but the most prominent—the one whose name is remembered—was Lydia.

This story is sparse, but some clues point to Lydia being an outsider. I had usually heard Lydia described as wealthy because she dealt in purple cloth, which was an expensive cloth that only the wealthy could afford because the process to make it was messy and foul. But Lydia seems to be an outsider, since they are gathered outside the gates, and she is a Gentile. But Paul, remember, seemed to have a special calling to the conversion of Gentiles. Lydia was not Jewish, but she was already a “worshiper of God.”

Paul and the others sat down and talked to these women, and Lydia listened, and, our reading tells us, “The Lord opened her heart.”

I find that detail helpful when tempted to think that everything depends on *me*. The Lord opened her heart. So yes, Paul was brilliant and everything, but her conversion happened because of the *Lord*, not Paul.

Makes me think of a mentor I had when going through the ordination process. He was very bossy, unlike all of the other mentors who just told their mentees “call me if you have any questions.” This man, who was British, gave me long, boring books to read and had me write reports about them and then complained that my reports did not contain enough footnotes.

He also made me plant carrots, which was fine: I like fresh carrots. But he told me to count the seeds, and then count how many sprouted, and to report to him weekly.

I wrote to everyone I could think of to complain about this man, but everyone seemed amused instead of incensed on my behalf. So I did what he asked, and at the end, he said he hoped that would remind me of how only God gives growth. God needed me to plant the seeds and water them and care for them, but it was up to God what sprouted and what grew. I want to say that it was an infantilizing and insulting thing for him to do, but here I am preaching about it nineteen years later.

God opened Lydia’s heart, and she and her whole household became baptized. Verses like these are ones we use when explaining why we Episcopalians baptize infants and young children and others who may not be old enough to understand what is going on—not that any of us actually understands the mystery of the sacraments. But “whole households” of various characters in this book becoming baptized indicates that infant and child baptism happened in biblical times.

Back to Lydia herself. Baptism is not the end, as we all know. Lydia went on to use her resources to further the kingdom. “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord,” she tells Paul and those with him, “come and stay at my home.” And then did. And then again in verse 40, after Paul and Silas [by the way, isn’t Silas a great middle name for Justin and Emily’s new child?]

had been arrested and spent time in jail, they again made their way to Lydia's house where "they encouraged all the brothers and sisters."

Whether or not Lydia was herself a wealthy wearer of purple, her dealings in purple cloth had at least made her enough money to own a home, and she shared that with Paul and Silas. They continued on their way, but she presumably stayed, continued dealing with purple cloth, and continued in the apostles' teaching and fellowship and in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers, as we are all called to do following baptism.

Lydia is another so-called "ordinary" Christian we read about in Easter like Ananias and Dorcas whom I talked about two and three weeks ago. As we approach so-called ordinary time, these stories can inspire us. None of us are ordinary, especially after baptism. Where might your vision lead not just you, but someone you haven't met yet?