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Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

8/15/2021

Philippians 1.3-11

Acts 16.6-15

Welcome Company

Every once in a while, I wake up remembering a dream. It doesn’t happen very often--but when it does they typically involve me panic writing a sermon only to discover that it’s already Sunday and I’m in the pulpit without a script, or that dream when I’m back in seminary, it’s finals week and I haven’t been to a single class once.

While my dreams give you a window into how stressed out I get when I feel unprepared, my dreams have never taken on significant meanings or held divine messages from above.

But in the book of Acts, as the Holy Spirit begins to breathe and move among God’s people--dreams, visions and trances become vehicles for revealing who is invited into the newly born church.

Earlier in the book of Acts, a man named Ananias received a vision where he was told “to get up and go see a man of Tarsus, who’s name was Saul-because at that very moment Saul was praying and seeing a vision of a man named Ananias--who would be coming to lay hands on him so he could regain his sight”

...only…there was problem...

Ananias knew who Saul was..

How Saul had been persecuting, even killing members of the church...

No way was Ananias going to visit Saul…

but the vision was clear—“Go!”

The apostle Peter fell into a trance where he saw heaven open and a large sheet lowered to the ground by its four corners--everything that was considered “unclean” and therefore not part of the kosher diet was on the sheet-and as Peter stared at the contents he heard a voice say “Get up, Peter; kill and eat--what God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

Ananias followed the vision and by God’s Spirit, Saul became Paul who began traveling the known world spreading the good news of God’s love. And as a result of his trance, Peter began ministering to the Gentile community inviting them to be part of God’s kingdom.

These two visions are crucial for our story today, as we encounter Paul on his second missionary journey which will take him into gentile territory-a journey which begins with a lot of rejection and a new vision.

As Paul, Timothy and Silas set out--their attempts at entering cities not only seem to fail, but for some reason, the author says that they were forbidden to enter Phrygia and Galatia by the Holy Spirit. Then when they went to Bithynia the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to enter.

I wish there were more details...How did they know it was the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of Jesus that didn’t allow them to enter into those towns and speak in those places? Were there more visions? A holy trance that went beyond the ability of words to describe? Or did they just experience a lot of slammed doors?

The text is silent as to what that looked or sounded like. But as they experienced rejection after rejection-- Paul had a vision where a man pleaded with him saying: “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”

Convinced this was God calling them to action--they left, and found their way to Philippi. On the Sabbath they made their way to the river--where they thought there might be a place of prayer.

This deviates from what Paul would typically have done--usually after arriving in a new town, he would go to a synagogue on the Sabbath and speak to the community.

But in Philippi they go down to the river.

There’s some speculation that the city of Philippi didn’t have the needed number of observant Jewish men in order to have a synagogue-there’s also speculation that Lydia being known as a “worshiper of God” means that she was probably a gentile who observed the Jewish faith but was not a full convert into the community.

One thing the text tells us for sure--was that those who gathered at the river on the Sabbath had come because it was a place of prayer—So Paul, Silas and Timothy made their way their too--and upon their arrival they met, not a man from Macedonia, but a woman named Lydia.

There are only three verses in the book of Acts that talk about this woman--and yet we learn a lot about her:

For one, Lydia is named—while her appearance is brief, the fact that we know her name tells us she carries deep significance.

We also learn that Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth--purple cloth was a luxury.

The pigment came from a sea mollusk-which meant the color was rare and expensive—so it wouldn’t be a stretch of the imagination to think that her work was lucrative and Lydia was doing well as a business woman.

She was also the head of her own household--in a few verses after this story, Paul and Silas are jailed and upon their release, the guard and his whole household are converted...the language is the same--right or wrong, in these stories when the head of a household experiences a conversion, the whole household experiences it too.

We also know, that after listening to Paul and receiving baptism, Lydia opens her home and welcomes Paul, Silas and Timothy to stay.

But while our text for today stopped at verse 16. Lydia makes one more appearance in verse 40. After Paul and Silas’s night in jail, upon their release, they went to Lydia’s home--the text says that “when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.”

All of this information is condensed into just a few short phrases--but this encounter was precipitated by dreams and visions—so…what might God be up to?

One of my favorite letters written by Paul is the letter to the church in Philippi--Paul opens the letter by saying “I thank my God every time I remember you…” The warmth and love that echo in the words from this letter are clear--this was a congregation that was close to Paul’s heart.

And while Lydia is never named in the letter, I wonder, was it in the walls of her house that the first church in Philippi had its start?

Were the warm and encouraging words of the apostle Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi read for the first time in Lydia’s home?

Was it her willingness to listen and respond with her profound generosity and hospitality that allowed the congregation to gather, grow and thrive?

Because in a very short span of time, strangers had met by a river, good news had been proclaimed, hearts had been opened, baptism received and doors of a home thrown wide for all to come in…

What if this was God’s dream and vision all along?

Where going to look for God’s presence doesn’t always lead to the doors of the religious institution but also to the banks of the river.

Where the church isn’t made up of the usual suspects, but of a broad spectrum of humanity? Where hospitality turns complete strangers into the body of Christ?

For Paul his visit to the river brought company not just for a few days, but a fellowship that welcomed him after a night in jail and greeted him through letters for years to come.

For Lydia and the rest of those gathered—extending hospitality not only brought new life and hope but a community and the gift of being a part of something so much bigger than herself.

You and I may never receive visions and dreams or experience the mystery of a trance, but we are invited to take part in God’s vision for creation and for each of us—to welcome others in and to help call down God’s kingdom here and now—to listen eagerly for good news and to respond with generosity—And it can all start with the simple act of extending hospitality to those around us and in doing so discover welcome company for the journey ahead.

 May it be so for you and for me, Amen.