

Sermon: strategy or prompting

Psalm 67

Acts 16:9-15

Do you believe that when God closes one door, He opens another? I sure do. And this was certainly the experience of Paul and his companions; Silas, Timothy, and Luke. We are not told exactly how, but two negative commands were given by God's Holy Spirit, counterbalanced by a positive leading. First, after revisiting the congregations in Phrygia and Galatia, the three 'were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia, so they continued on towards Mysia, and would have continued on into Bithynia, and for a second time the Spirit 'did not permit them'. So, as to avoid Mysia, they continued in the only way they could, and 'they came down to Troas on the Aegean Sea'. Here's where we see the positive leading revealed to Paul. A man he identified as "a man of Macedonia", stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us". Together, Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke "sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them". As with many missionaries after them, they were not following their own carefully thought-out strategy, but God's prompting and leading. So, they sailed from Troas to Philippi, the capital of that region of Greek Macedonia. That's the geography lesson for the day.

On the Sabbath day the missionaries headed out of the city, "to a place by a riverside where prayer was customarily made". Now, you might think they would prefer to speak in the city; to the likes of rabbis and philosophers; but no, Paul and his companions were just as happy to meet with folks where they were found; by the riverside outside the city. And as it happened, they encountered a group of women who regularly met by the river's edge for prayer. Following prayer and social fellowship, Paul soon began sharing the message of 'Jesus Christ and Him crucified'.

It is here we are introduced to Lydia; one of the women worshipping God. "The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul". This was the encounter which God had planned all along, making it inevitable that openness and Truth should meet here together, at this time, in this place, and including these specific people. This is not only an inspirational story but a motivational one, as well. You see, Lydia becomes one of those people whom many wish to emulate; a person incentivised and full of encouragement.

Today then, Luke is sharing his story of a woman he believed was a great role model for the disciples of the early Church. She was a person of integrity, creativity, and intelligence, and also serves as an excellent example for us today of how much we can do for ourselves, our families, and the community in which we live. Luke shares her story to inspire and motivate us to continue to be the best we can be for our Lord.

Well, who was Lydia then, and why is she important? Lydia was a successful businesswoman; a native of the city of Thyatira; located about 250 miles east of Philippi. If Thyatira sounds at all familiar to you, it's because it is one of the seven major Churches mentioned much later in the Book of Revelation; a church of faith, love, perseverance, and good works; just like this church. Church history tells us that Lydia was in the import and export business, a seller of purple dyed cloth around Asia Minor and Macedonia. That Lydia was praying at the river's edge suggests she was a devout follower of Judaism in a largely Greek area which had many Roman immigrants; an area where many gods including Isis, Apollo, and others, were worshiped. It is interesting then that Paul and his missionary team

were prompted by the Holy Spirit to walk down to the city gate near the river where a group of Jews would meet each Sabbath for a time of prayer, worship, and study.

Part of Paul's strategy then was to remain after worship to better connect with these Jewish believers. Here was Paul's opportunity to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, and here was Lydia; prompted to listen to what Paul was sharing. The Holy Spirit had already begun His work in Lydia's heart and life. Divine prompting and human strategy had come together to impact her life.

Can't you just hear Paul speaking about salvation in Jesus; how Jesus came from Heaven as the Son of God; how He healed people, cast out demons, and brings deliverance to people's lives; how Jesus preached about repentance, faith, and being the Way, the truth, and the life; how Jesus died on a cross for the sins of all humankind; how He rose from the dead and is now seated at the right hand of God the Father, making intercession for each and every one of us; once for all? Can you hear Paul sharing how a person can be born again, baptized, and filled with God's Holy Spirit whether they are Jewish or Gentile; how Jesus was ransomed so that all men, women, and children can be redeemed, renewed, and restored? Well, the more Lydia heard about Jesus, the more she was convinced that Jesus truly is the Messiah; that Jesus is the Saviour of the world. She immediately recognized that Jesus is the fulfillment of all her Jewish hopes.

When Paul was finished speaking and offered the invitation, Lydia was ready to surrender her life to Jesus. There is no overwhelming presence of a great miracle or sign. It was just people sharing in Jesus' name. You could say that Lydia became the first European Christian convert. Her house became Paul's first missionary headquarters for his work in Macedonia.

You see; prompted by God's Holy Spirit; the Church of Jesus Christ is continually on the move sharing the message of redemption and blessing. Lydia desired to make her conversion public through the sacrament of baptism. She had everyone gather around to see her being baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. She wanted everyone to know that she was becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ. Lydia was not the only one baptized that day. She went back to her home and brought her whole household for them to hear the message of Jesus, be converted and baptized. She was passionate about her experience and wanted every one of them to experience what it meant to be free of sin and filled with God's Spirit. Clearly, Lydia was not a silent witness.

Do you remember the woman at the well; the Samaritan women who encountered Jesus? This was another meeting that was planned by God to illustrate Christ's mercy and love for us. Desperate to find some peace in her life, the woman at the well was forever changed by Jesus' love for her. And then there was Zacchaeus who came down from the tree, opened his home to Jesus, and went on to serve Jesus. These two examples tie together with Lydia's story. The Samaritan Woman and Zacchaeus also used their stories to tell others about the living water they found in Jesus.

Lydia began to call her friends and neighbours to tell them how Jesus has transformed her and baptized her with His Holy Spirit. After the baptism, Lydia invited Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke to come and stay at her house. We see her using the gifts that God had given her to be a good businesswoman, to be a good hostess, and to be a good evangelist; that is, engaging with others the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Lord has also given each of us these very special gifts and talents, and when we surrender our gifts and talents to the Holy Spirit, we also co-partner with Him in growing His Church. Lydia became a champion for Paul and his missionary team. Was it prompting or strategy that Lydia invited these men to her home? She said, “If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house’. And she persuaded them”.

This morning, Luke has shared with us a story of a woman who is a remarkable role model. She was a woman who excelled in her career. She held to her convictions and faith. And when she heard the message of Jesus, she was open to receive and be transformed by Him. She even opened her home to be headquarters for Paul's missionary work. Throughout Church history, Lydia has been seen as a woman whose life teaches us the importance of listening to the Word of God with an open and obedient heart; the importance of the sacrament of Christian baptism; the importance of evangelism; what I call engagement; the importance of Christian service, generosity, and hospitality.

The reason Lydia submitted herself and her household to baptism was not because of coercion or manipulation. It was entirely prompted by God, whatever the strategy used. The proof of Lydia's newfound faith in Jesus Christ was then manifested in both her hospitality and outreach.

My prayer today is that we see the face of Christ in all whom we meet, and that they see Christ's face in us, too.

To God be the glory.

Amen.

Sunday, June 1st is Holy Communion.

If you unable to physically come to church,
please let me know as I am happy to serve communion in your home.

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