

Sermon May 22 2022 Annual Meeting Sunday  
Rev. Brent Damrow

SCRIPTURE:

Acts 16:9-15:

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 worshipper 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.

SERMON: "A Whole Bunch of Stuff" The Rev. Brent Damrow

There are stories that you don't expect to like, and instead you fall in love with them. Stories for some reason you feel you either have to read or are forced on you, and yet you end up deeply wanting to read them. There are stories that seem awfully foreign and yet somehow you find yourself right at home.

A few years ago, I had the great pleasure of encountering just such a story. The obligation came willingly. I actually asked my mother to pick out a book that she had read and that she thought I would like, and sent it to me with the promise that I would do so. So she sent me a thoroughly unexpected book. It was the story about a Swedish centenarian, a former explosives expert turned nursing home escapee on the run, not just from the nurses, but from a mobster and the law, with an elephant nonetheless. A Swede name Allan Karlsson. He was a man who knew he needed to go somewhere, but when he jumped out the window had no idea where it would take him. And let's say that book felt a bit foreign, at least at first. Has anyone had the pleasure of reading that book? It is an unexpectedly fun one. My intrigue turned to laughter and then to depth, until all those characters somehow became family in Jonas Jonasson's delightful book, "The 100-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared." And by the end of his crazy, unexpected adventures, it became a beloved way of shaping how I see the world. And more importantly, how I want to be part of it.

Truth be told, when about three weeks ago I opened the lectionary to take a look at the readings, I encountered this text in a similar way. The Book of Acts only comes in the lectionary at Easter time, and so there's always that obligation on a pastor to at least consider it. The Book of Acts is a joyous romp, but it's a roller coaster of a ride if you read it all the way through. So many characters, many of whom you just can't seem to relate to. That is, until you see yourself in

them. There are places with crazy names that seem so distant, until you realize that you have been to places just like them. Times that seem so long ago, until those stories evoke something that happened just last week.

And this reading from Acts is quintessential. Upon first glance, I felt like it is something that I should do. And at first glance, all of this stuff seems so far away. There is in this passage a whole bunch of stuff just put together. And my first reaction is, oh my goodness, what do you do with all that stuff? But then, looking closer, all of that stuff in this story was so familiar. All of it taking place thousands of years ago, thousands of miles away, brought up so many memories of this place, this church, this home, and of you. And on Annual Meeting Sunday, it got me thinking how might this unexpected story shape how we see our faith, our world, our church. And just as importantly, how we feel called to be a part of it.

You take this passage home and look at it. You're going to see theme after theme that is central to how we understand church. There is both specific location and a whole lot of movement. There is both the fact that people of faith set out for nothing more than a dream, and the deep reason why behind it all. There is, in spite of being in foreign places, a familiar thing like Sabbath and prayer. There is already faith in many of them, and yet the invitation to so much more. There are quiet moments, there are people, there is relationship. There are invitations and acceptance. And the truth that beyond these verses, the story goes on for each of these people in countless ways that affected countless people. Blessed to be a blessing.

Like Allan Karlsson, the Apostle Paul spent his whole life on the move. And I think, kind of like Karlsson, if you read Paul you know that he was a master of explosives. Oh, not dynamite, but Paul was not afraid to throw in the explosive grace and power of the gospel and just watch it go off in a crowd. You see, before this passage, Paul was leaving. He was going anywhere but Macedonia. In fact, he was going completely the opposite way from Macedonia. But after hearing this call in the night, this vague direction to go to this large place, Paul immediately changed direction, even though he had no idea why he was going and, quite frankly, no idea specifically, where he was to go. Might have been easier for our Scripture reader today if the vision had just said go to Philippi. But instead we learn that Paul traveled many places before landing in this seat of power: Philippi.

What I love about this story, though, if you know anything about Paul, is notice what Paul does when he gets there. He doesn't know what he's supposed to do. And so he just hangs out. Day after day after day, Paul just hangs out. He didn't fall into the temptation of relevance or action or feeling like he needed to do something. He didn't look up the local synagogue. He didn't go to the place of power and just start spouting off and throwing explosives. He simply waited. To see where the love of Christ would call him and where he would be needed.

I wonder for me, and maybe for the church, how such an approach might be helpful to us. Paul simply remained in the city. No mention of teaching, healing, confronting, or any of the things that Paul seemed to always do. He simply remained for a long time. There is no magical answer Luke gives us here on how long we should wait, until the answer for what we should do comes to us. Instead, the reminder that we simply need to wait until we know it because we see it, or in this case because we met it.

I love that in this story that when the Sabbath comes, they now only seek out worship even though they're traveling, on vacation in the summer. But they also know where to look, where people of faith would gather, outside of those powerful city gates, down by the cool life-giving river. And I imagine they walked until they just found people doing what you're doing – sitting, praying, thinking, singing. They found them and they simply joined in. On their travels, they sought out local worship, because even more so, I think, when we leave home we need to find a place that is home.

And here in Acts, notice it says that what Paul did was he just sat down and talked to them. I see it as a give and take, a sharing of prayers and teaching, a chance to learn more about each other and the journeys we share. The reason we share prayers like we do. The chance to give your heart to and yet be open to something beyond yourself. Huh. Something in there, I think, for us, too. And finally, in all this stuff, I love when this great mission of traveling to multiple places in multiple ways, that it came down to the heart of what this mission was all about: this woman named Lydia.

The Bible calls her a God worshiper, which means that she is someone from outside the traditional faith, drawn in to see what she saw in God and to find meaning in the other people who were worshipping. Lydia, in the little bit we learn about her, seems to be a woman of success and means. A woman who may or may not have been married. In fact, a woman who cannot be confined to any box, no matter how much we want to put her in one. Rather, Lydia is a woman profoundly open to being yet more open. To embracing what she found to be of depth and purpose, and to bring others along, too. Do you guys know anyone like Lydia sitting out there with you? I know I do. This place is full of Lydias.

And what I love in this passage is yes, she opens her faith to baptism. Yes, she asks for herself and her whole family to be baptized. Yes, she goes through all of those things. But what I love most is at the end of it all she says to Paul, hey, how about you just stay for a while. How about instead of packing up your chairs and rushing off this afternoon to whatever it is of beauty and meaning and purpose that you have to go to, hey Paul, how about you just stick around and stay for a while. And I love how Paul, the man who never seemed content to stop, the man who was always on the move, the man who always wanted to confront power, the man who wanted to preach. The man who would preach so long, by the way, he preached so long once that a young man sitting in a window on the second floor of this sanctuary fell out and died during the middle of the sermon. Don't be worried about that, Paul brought him back to life, so that's all good. But this man Paul, who always needed to do something, was simply content to stay and be, to linger. And I get not just that he could teach her, but she prevailed upon him that he might learn from her. I wonder what the impression was that Paul made on Lydia. And equally, what was the impression that Lydia made on Paul, as he would go out and do his work.

There's much research in this area about Jonathan Edwards, and how he preached to the Indians. How he gave them messages about what he wanted them to hear. The more recent research, though, is showing how Edwards' theology was influenced by those who already lived here, what he learned from them.

This is Annual Meeting Sunday. On this day we have another story to tell right here in this annual meeting report. And there is a whole bunch of stuff in here about what this church has been up to and how we see life unfolding here. There are new leaders eager to get started. And yet I hope that this story from Acts, this story of all this stuff and of slowing down, that it might resonate with us. I hope that this story that we forced upon you this morning might be a story you actually come to enjoy. I hope that this story and all this stuff in it comes to shape how you and I and all of us together encounter this thing called faith.

Allan Karlsson jumped out of the window of his nursing home at 100 years old. He did it because he knew he could. He did it because he knew he needed to be on the move. He did it because, if you read the book, his whole life was full of adventures you can't believe, and of connections he made that profoundly changed him, but also shaped the entire world from communist China to Stalin to the Spanish Civil War, to everywhere you could imagine. To read that book is to see how that man, Allan Karlsson, a cantankerous 100-year-old, remained open to new adventures in any kind of circumstance, whether running toward or away from something, and finding new truth and relationship along the way, even with an elephant.

Allan Karlsson lived that kind of life. Paul lived that kind of life. I know Lydia lived that kind of life. And I know we can, too. If we take all of this stuff from the story, not just into our knowledge, but into the way we live, and why. If we don't just read this story, but see it unfolding all around us. If we don't see it as compulsory, but as blessing. And if we recognize ourselves in the midst of all these characters.

Friends, here's what I know. If we let the Spirit take us for a ride, and if we meet each day faithfully, as this church has been doing for 288 years, and our faith for generations upon generations more, with open hearts and open minds, we will find joy. We will be changed. And maybe right alongside of it, we will change the world, too. But even more importantly, we will meet people like Lydia, and our lives will be the better for it. Amen.