

**“Lydia the Baptized” Proverbs 25:1-5, 21-25; Acts 16:9-15**  
**6th Sunday of Easter Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Michele Ward May 26, 2019**

It seems that God was playing a major game of telephone with Paul that night when he had a vision about a man in Macedonia. Or frankly, Paul misremembered his dream--because he sure didn't meet a man in Macedonia in this story! We know what that's like when it comes to dreams, don't we? Some dreams show up as vague outlines in our minds when we wake up, distorted by our groggy state or our faulty memories. Our dreams and our remembrances of them do not tend to be the most accurate pictures of reality.

And yet, the Book of Acts is full of people having visions and interpreting dreams. Like last week, when Annie read the passage about the vision Peter had about the sheet coming down from heaven full of animals and he heard God's voice multiple times. Peter had this vision right before he traveled to the home of Cornelius, the first Gentile convert. Peter then used that dream to explain why he was eating and staying with Cornelius and his family. Now, try explaining a strange dream like that to a group of people trying to understand some of the decisions you're making about conversion and belonging! What in the world does a magic sheet full of animals have to do with God? And yet, because of this vision, Peter goes to visit Cornelius, the man who becomes the first official Gentile convert and leads his household to accept Christianity. Because of this vision, the community back in Jerusalem begins to accept Christians from other cultures and traditions.

These strange dreams seem to be clues that lead to further discoveries in Acts, guiding Peter and Paul by something much larger or stronger than their own logic or the social norms around them. Perhaps their visions are meant to be statements about the myriad of ways that the Holy Spirit works in and through us.

Whatever the case may be, God has ideas for Paul's ministry that Paul had not thought up or could not have dreamt up himself; God needed to plant a vision of a compelling anonymous man in his mind in order for Paul to head to Macedonia--to Europe-- into fully non-Jewish territory. He brings a young man named Timothy with him--a convert that is biracial, both Jewish and Greek. Timothy is an embodiment of the Christian movement-- he is someone who understands and relates to both the Judaic and Hellenistic aspects of his faith and his culture. It is this team of people, among others, that show up in the town of Philippi--Paul, the former prosecutor of the early Christian converts and Timothy, a biracial, bicultural man. I imagine that they were looking for a

crowd of men, perhaps someone who even matched the description of the man in Paul's dream.

But that is not what they find. Do you know what they find on the Sabbath day, the day considered holy and made for rest by God in Genesis, a command that the Jewish people hold sacred? Do you know who they find outside the city gate of Philippi, near the river?

They do not find the Macedonian man from Paul's dream in this gathering; rather, they find a group of women, and most notably, the business owner and matriarch Lydia. It is possible that there was not an established synagogue in Philippi, which would lead them to worship in the open air. It is also possible that these Gentile women were unwelcome in male-dominated or purity law-based spaces, if there was such a place of worship available to them in Philippi. This gathering near the riverside does not include men or priests, but women. The apostles join these women in their prayers, and Paul sat down with them. He did not tower of them, but he joined them, in the dirt, on the rocks, near the river. I love this image of Paul, Timothy, Silas, and the others sharing good news with these women on the borders of the city. That is where the Spirit moves--in the unseen places, when we sit down with one another, when we go to the places we suppose prayer is happening.

It is in this holy encounter that God speaks to Lydia. In fact, the text tells us that she is already a worshiper of God. Paul does not bring God to her or the others gathered at the river to pray. Paul is there as much to give as he is to receive. Not only does Luke tell us that, we also learn that Lydia deals in purple cloth. This might seem like a minor detail, but it would have been a social class signifier to the early listeners of Acts. Purple was an expensive dye, and only the wealthy could afford cloth dyed in that manner. This means that Lydia was at the top of her field in the cloth merchant industry. Her clients were wealthy, well-connected, and respectable. This also implies that she was a woman of means, as she would have amassed wealth from the success of her business.

It is this wealthy, successful, Eastern European business woman that Paul sits down with by a river to pray. And it is this woman, Lydia, becomes baptized that day. Paul's words resonated with deeply. The God that she already knew, the God that she prayed to on the sabbath in this place with others, was speaking to her from the life and witness of Paul. And it is the power of this encounter that led to Lydia making an important decision that day- she decided to become baptized. Now, Presbyterians baptize at all ages, as you may have witnessed yourself over the last few weeks with the baptisms of Caleb Soeun and Max Palmer. Babies, teens, adults, doesn't matter. Baptism is a radical act. It may seem tame to sprinkle water over someone's head, but it is

a bold moment for an individual and for a community. It is bold because everytime a baptism takes place, Christians declare something audacious - we declare that God's grace is enough for us even when we do not understand it. We declare that God's grace is meant for us even when we are not sure we belong. And we declare that we will love one another into that grace when we make communal promises to one another whenever we baptize someone here.

Lydia believes that audacious grace is for her. And because she does, she asks Paul to baptize her. But she is not the only one baptized that day. Luke tells us that Paul baptizes Lydia's entire household. This is significant for a couple of reasons. Do you remember our friend Cornelius from earlier? He is the first Gentile convert, the one Peter visits and then baptizes with his entire household. Fast forward to Paul, who also has a vision, and also baptized a Gentile person and their household. Any guesses about what is majorly different this time? Paul encounters Lydia outside the city limits rather than at her estate, as Peter encounters Cornelius. This reveals Lydia's boundary crossing nature and Paul's willingness to meet her where she is. It is also unusual that Lydia is the head of her household. She does not have a named partner of any kind. She is perhaps a widow or unmarried. She makes a unilateral decision for her household, one typically reserved for patriarchs. Lydia and Paul are both boundary crossers.

Her powerful faith proclamation is not for an internal epiphany alone. Lydia could have chosen to keep her thoughts to herself that Sabbath by the river. She could have chosen to internalize her spiritual awakening for fear of what others might think. After all, was she getting swept up in the powerful words of this guest? Was she thinking irrationally, getting baptized on the Sabbath. She does not keep her faith to herself. She extends the power of this sacrament to others through her decision to be baptized.

In our heavily individualized way of looking spiritual encounters, a communal decision like the baptism of an entire household may seem strange to our Western Presbyterian ears. *My understanding of God is for me, and your understanding of God is for you.* You may have heard that said or said it yourself. *Let me have my opinion of God, and you can have yours.* In an era of religious and ideological pluralism, endorsements of any single opinion, belief, or public act as applicable for all or most people are out of style and out of date.

But here's the thing - I'm all here for an understanding of God that is diverse and multi-faceted. For those of you here last week, you heard it in every single faith statement that our confirmands wrote. You saw it every single new member that joined two weeks ago. You heard it in Annalisa's description of

God as a galaxy. You heard it in Alex's description of God as a baseball coach. You heard it in Marcos's description of Jesus guiding us on our path. None of those descriptions of God were the same. And yet, they stemmed from the same place--an understanding of who God is and how God speaks to each of them. But what I'm not here for is keeping our understanding of God to ourselves. Peter has a crazy dream and then ends up encountering God in Cornelius and his community. Paul has a vision and then ends up witnessing God in Lydia and her sabbath prayer gathering. We heard new members and confirmands boldly declare through baptism, word, and prayer that they believe God is with them, they find God in this community and they will keep asking questions about their faith.

We are communal creatures. We need one another. Lydia did not pray alone on the sabbath all day. She gathered with others to pray and to share. She welcomes Paul, a stranger and a man, to join her sabbath group. And then, she extends some audacious grace to him and his companions. She insists that they stay with her while they are in Philippi. Paul, of course, says yes. He does not craft an excuse to refuse. He does not say they have a reservation already. He accepts. He gives and receives.

Lydia and Paul invite us to consider what we boldly declare with our words and with our lives. I cannot promise you will have a dream telling you what to do next. I would not put it past God, however, as anything is possible. I challenge you to not keep your encounters with God to yourselves. Do not be afraid to trust the unexpected leading of the Holy Spirit. You may never know the power of the word God has given you to say until you say it. You may never know the power of saying yes to grace until you say it. You may never know the power of extending or receiving hospitality until you do it.

Imagine you find yourself in a dream like this--a dream where human beings find unity diversity, a dream where audacious grace waits for you every second of your life, where children play safely in their neighborhoods, where returning citizens find welcoming arms. What would you say if I told you that dream is right now, this very moment? What if God is waiting for us to make that dream a reality?