

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

On the Loose
Acts 16.9-18
May 9, 2010
Amy Jacks Dean



Before reading the text

It's Mother's Day, but I will confess to you that I rarely care to mix secular holidays with the worship of God. So you won't typically find me preaching a Mother's Day or Father's Day or Fourth of July sermon. Today will be no exception. But I am aware that, while for many this is a day of great joy and celebration, for others it is a day of great grief and pain and this is the perfect place to acknowledge that. Many grieve mothers who have died. Many mothers grieve the death of their child. Other women yearn to be mothers with every fiber of their being while other women birth children that are not wanted. While this text from the Acts of the Apostles is not about mothers, it does feature women, and let's be honest, that's just not normal. As tempting as it is on this Mother's Day to focus on Lydia and the other women in the passage I'm about to read, I'll resist the temptation. But I do think it is worthy to note as we prepare to hear this text: The writer of the gospel of Luke is the author of the Acts of the Apostles. "Much has been written about Luke's view of women. Although largely oriented toward males . . . Luke's narrative world is still a location where females are given greater prominence and independence in comparison to his social world. Lydia is a literary example of a theological conviction: God's saving grace dismantles various social barriers that cultivate strife between people . . . the case of Lydia is especially invigorating as an example of the church's counterculture . . . her home becomes the spiritual center for the entire city, and the story's presumption is that she becomes its spiritual leader." (New Interpreter's Bible, Volume X, Robert W. Wall, page 235) But as

important as this is, it is Paul that has peaked my interest today at this time in the life of our church.

READ TEXT

I will confess that as of this past Tuesday I had no idea what I was preaching on today. Russ prepares a worship schedule about every 3 months with themes and Scriptures, but I just had not looked at it until this past Tuesday. Usually he gives a short paragraph of an idea that is simply a head start. Sometimes I take his idea and sometimes I don't, but there's always a little something there that at least introduces me to the text for the day. So on Tuesday I picked up the worship plan sheet and his only note by this Sunday was "Amy will preach from the lectionary texts for this week. She will somehow connect it to the visioning process." Well, great. That's real helpful! I dreaded opening the Bible to see what kind of text I was going to get that I would have to "make do" with a sense of visioning. So, literally, with a deep sigh I looked up the lectionary text for today and with a great sense of dread, I opened the Bible to Acts 16.9 and read: *During the night Paul had a vision . . . When he had seen the vision . . .* You can't imagine my excitement and relief – perhaps this was going to be easier than I had expected, and maybe, just maybe, I should learn to trust Russ more.

In a blog concerning this text, Walter Brueggemann says that this is "a narrative in which a vision leads to a new practical beginning." You see, Paul had been traveling around preaching the gospel and serving as missionary extraordinaire - establishing churches and checking in on them, joining forces with cohorts who shared his passion for preaching the Good News. And then, in the middle of doing what he did best, he gets a vision. This vision was outside the norm for Paul. Oh, he had had visions before – big visions: think Damascus Road – but this vision was a little different. This vision was a real branching out for Paul. In this vision, Paul gets a new

direction and a different focus. Brueggemann says that Paul was given a “new way. That new way was given ‘in a vision,’ a perception of reality outside the ordinary and beyond all conventionalism. This ‘chief apostle’ is ‘on the loose,’ unencumbered and ready for what is given by God.” When I read Brueggemann’s description of Paul in this story – “chief apostle on the loose” – I was immediately drawn to this image. And as I thought of our own visioning process, I realized that this is exactly what I want and hope for us. I want us to be “on the loose.” Brueggemann reminds us of what we already know, but often we have to be reminded of things we already know. “The vision led to proclamation of the news. This ‘pre-institutional’ church was free for news that challenged all old patterns and that invited to new life. We are not told the substance of his preaching. But we know [what Paul’s preaching was always about. It was always about] the news that in Jesus of Nazareth, the world has become open to God’s generosity; Paul’s listeners are invited to generosity based on God’s bottomless mercy. Paul did not need a vision to get ‘the message.’” Paul already knew the message. The vision wasn’t about what to preach. The vision was needed to “find a venue for his preaching.”

So if we consider this text within our own context I believe the same is true for us. We don’t need a vision to show us what our message is. We know our message: all people are persons of inherent worth; following the Way of Jesus is our path; worship and service are the central elements that hold our focus; we are sustained by grace; Hope, Peace, Joy and Love undergird and guide us; and we are in partnership with God to bring the Kingdom *on earth as it is in heaven*. I know the message, but I’m wondering if what we need is a vision like Paul’s that has to do with where to take the message and who needs to hear it. So I’ve been wondering this week – who in Charlotte needs what PRBC is preaching and teaching and practicing and where are they and how will we get this message to them or them to us?

Let me tell you – I don't know the answer to that and neither does the Vision Team. At least we don't know it yet, but it is one of our goals to know it. But first we need to finish hearing from you and we'll need to hear from the greater Charlotte community. I can't tell you what Park Road Baptist Church's vision is going to be. That's not my job. That's your job. My job today is to help engage this text and see if there is anything for us to glean that might help us in our visioning process. "Visions call prophets to mission. In Paul's vision, *there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'* . . . The proclamation of the good news is in response to the urgent plea for help. Paul's response is immediate. *We immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.* The rest of Acts hinges on this text." (New Interpreter's Bible, Volume X, Robert W. Wall, page 227)

Four phrases within this passage have stood out for me this morning. I think they may be very important for our church, and let me add that I think as you consider your own personal visions of what is next for you, these phrases may serve you well too.

First, Paul had to Cross Over *to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called [them] to proclaim the good news to them.* This leads me to think that maybe, just maybe, this has something to do with leaving our comfort zones. The Macedonian call, for Paul, was uncharted territory. It is so much easier and certainly safer to keep doing what we know how to do the way we know how to do it. But upon receiving the vision, Paul crossed over. I have no idea what this might mean for us or what this might look like, but I believe it will require us to take a deep breath. I didn't get out all the biblical maps to study the terrain that Paul had to cross over, because Paul's journey simply serves as a way for us to ponder our journey. But I can imagine some of the things we might have to cross over to get where we are going. We may have to cross

over to the other side of town or may just have to cross over a few of the streets surrounding our little patch of sacred ground. We may have to continue cross over the 90 miles of water that separates us from our Cuban brothers and sisters or we may just have to cross over to Washington, D.C. to keep holding our own government accountable for our complicity in this complex injustice of a continued failed embargo. We may have to cross over to the other side of our campus to bring more volunteers to the ministries we host on our campus or we may have to cross over to some assisted living facilities to make visits to the aging among us. We may have to cross over our own prejudices and insecurities and we may have to cross over our own fears. And we may have to cross over into places none of us have even dared to dream yet and we may have to cross over in ways that haven't even crossed our minds yet. But when any of us plans for the future, we would do well to follow Paul's lead and go ahead and cross over to get where we are going.

Then the text says that Paul Set Sail *from Troas*. This phrase says to me that he took off. The text doesn't say anything about whether he looked back or not, but setting sail implies running with the wind and trusting the Spirit as our guide. The wind has long been an image of God and how God works in this world. The words from the second verse in the Bible are some of the best known words in the world. Books have been written about the use of the Hebrew word RUACH in it. It reads: *And the earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the RUACH of God moved upon the face of the waters*. Some say that should be translated: *the SPIRIT of God moved upon the face of the waters* while other say the translation should be: *the WIND of God moved upon the face of the waters*. It is awfully hard set sail if the breeze is not blowing. But on a windy day, if you know how to tack and when to drift, if you learn how to read the patterns of the wind, then you too can set sail. It's too early to really talk

about this stage of the vision process, but my hope and prayer is that when we catch a glimpse of the vision before us that we will be willing to learn about a nautical life so that we can Set Sail following the Wind of God wherever he blows and however she moves. And I hope and pray that we will let the wind blow in our hair, even allowing it to get messed up if need be, for only when we set sail will we be truly living into the Vision and the Spirit.

Paul's third step in his envisioned journey was that he Took a Straight Course to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi. He was focused and purposeful. We can be so easily distracted, especially living in a culture that seeks to divert our attention. As we seek to discern a vision together in this place, many ideas will surface and many hopes will be shared. And we will not be able to be and do everything we dream. Once we decide on our course, we will need to take a straight path – focused and committed to live out all that we envision as God's calling on our church.

Finally, the text says that Paul Remained in this city for some days. And it was because Paul and his fellow travelers remained, stayed put and planted, that they found a group of women down by the river who were already dedicated to the worship of God. Paul's vision wasn't to convert Lydia and the others. They already worshipped God. But they needed more – more support, more teaching, more fellowship and prayer and relationship with a larger part of The Church. And it made all the difference.

Paul was one of those guys that, as Brueggemann put it, was “on the loose.” That's what I want us to be. On the Loose. I can almost see it. Almost. May it be so.

