

Texts: Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29

During these weeks of the Easter season our first lesson each Sunday has been from the book of Acts. All of the stories we have read have had to do with the Holy Spirit's work in the first days of the Christian church. Paul's conversion. Peter's meeting with Cornelius the centurion. Peter raising Tabitha from death.

This morning we read about a vision Paul had of a man calling him to "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Let's first set the scene. Paul is traveling with two companions -- Silas and Timothy. Their travels up until today's story have been through Asia Minor, the western part of modern-day Turkey. And now I'm going to back up and read a couple of verses earlier than our first reading began:

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. 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."

Let's think about what this means. The Holy Spirit stopped them from moving farther east into Asia Minor and then stopped them again from moving north into Bithynia, which is located on the edge of the Black Sea. It's interesting and maybe a bit worrisome to learn that the Spirit did not allow them to travel in the direction they had originally intended. We usually think of the Spirit as having a positive influence, not a negative one. We can only imagine what might have happened to make these missionaries realize that their travel plans were being blocked. Maybe they kept being delayed; maybe they missed a connection; maybe they were harassed. Who knows? What we do know is that they

wound up in Troas, a town on the northwest coast, on the Aegean Sea. It is there that Paul had his vision.

“One door closes and another one opens,” as they say. Prevented from traveling to the north and the east, the way that Paul, Silas and Timothy were shown is to the west, across the sea, to Macedonia. That is in modern-day Greece. The book of Acts tells the story of how God’s word kept on spreading, and for the first time it would spread into the place we know as Europe. Paul and his traveling companions crossed a border to bring the good news into a new place.

The missionaries make their way to Philippi, which is, we are told, a “leading city of Macedonia, a Roman colony.” Philippi was a cosmopolitan city, founded about 350 years before Jesus was born by Phillip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. It was a place that thought of itself as an example of what the Roman Empire could offer to the world – prosperity, safety, the good life.

Paul’s custom when he arrived in any new city was to go to the Jewish synagogue on the Sabbath and talk about Jesus. It seems that in Philippi there wasn’t a synagogue. The Jews gathered outside the city gates near the river. In other words, they went down to the river to pray, just like in that old gospel song.

It might not seem so unusual to us today to read that women had also gathered at the place of prayer. But in Paul’s day, women were second-class, a bit higher in status than slaves, but they were still the property of their husbands or fathers. So it is doubly surprising to learn about Lydia, one of the women at the river that morning. First, we learn that she was a “worshipper of God” – which means that she was a Gentile who followed the teachings of Judaism. Second, she was a “dealer in purple cloth.” Purple dye

was a rare and extremely expensive commodity. The only people who were even allowed to wear purple cloth were the very wealthy and royalty. Three characteristics set Lydia apart. First, she was a business woman and likely quite well-to-do. Second, she was the head of her own household. Third, we learn that she was from Thyatira, which is back in Asia Minor. It's likely that Philippi attracted people from all throughout the Roman Empire, much like any modern city is filled with people from all places and walks of life. Including foreigners who came to live and do business there.

So Paul and Silas and Timothy head to Macedonia at the request of a man in a vision and what do they find? Not a man but a woman. Not a Jew but a Gentile. Not a Macedonian at all, but a foreigner.

The Holy Spirit works in surprising ways, doesn't it? The Spirit led those three men in a completely new direction, crossing borders of gender and faith and class, in order to bring the message of Jesus to a new and unknown place. It's a meeting of two worlds – men and women, missionary and business owner, Jewish Christian and Gentile. The gospel message takes hold in a place outside the city, down by the river, away from the power and influence of the Roman authorities.

We then learn that the Lord opened Lydia's heart to hear Paul's words, and to listen and respond in faith. Her faith is ignited so powerfully that she was baptized, maybe even right there and then in the river, and then she invited Paul, Timothy and Silas to stay in her home. They received God's hospitality through the hands and the heart of Lydia.

How many borders were crossed in this story? From Asia into Europe. From inside the city to outside the gates by the river. Even the border of social convention was crossed as men sat down to talk with women.

As I traveled over the past week, I have been thinking during this past week about the borders that define our lives. I flew over the borders of several states to get to my friends' house in New Jersey. I was a Gentile guest at their Jewish Passover celebration. I made new friends. I believe that the Spirit was powerfully at work as we talked around the table.

Last year John and I volunteered to be house parents for one of the international students at the college. We were assigned a young woman from Japan named Nao. Some of you may remember meeting her, since she came to church a few times. She stayed at our house over the winter and spring breaks. We enjoyed getting to know her, to see this town through her eyes, to struggle with her to communicate, to eat the food she cooked for us. There were border crossings at work here too – the border of English and Japanese, the border of having someone you barely know stay in your home, the borders of culture and worldview.

The Nebraska Synod is organizing a vision trip to Argentina this coming November. This is not a mission trip in the sense of what we can do to help, or what we can bring to give away. This will be a vision trip in the sense of how can our eyes be opened to new possibilities for relationship? How can we North Americans learn from South American Lutheran churches what it is like to be the minority faith community in a country where Christianity is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic or Pentecostal? How do we bring those lessons back? How do we proclaim God's good news in a culture of indifference and hostility? One of the reasons that it makes sense to go to Argentina is that the Pampas are similar to the Great Plains. Cattle ranching is serious business. Think about the borders to

be crossed – northern hemisphere to southern hemisphere. English to Spanish. It is not so very different from Philippi in the 1st century.

What would you do if the Holy Spirit led you in a new direction? Would you go eagerly and immediately? Or would you try to resist?

This is what it is like to be a follower of Jesus. You never know what border to you will be asked to cross next. Following God out into the world is risky business. It brings you into contact with people who are not like you. It brings you into contact with hurt and trouble and hunger and violence and pain.

The good news is that the Holy Spirit is powerfully at work, just as Jesus promised. And just as Jesus promised, the Spirit continues to teach us and to remind us of all that Jesus said. The Spirit continues the work of the Father and the Son in our midst. The Spirit calls us, leads us, maybe even pushes us, to cross borders, to reach across the borders that we have constructed and make new friends, find new ways of ministering to a troubled and hurting world, talk about what God is up to.

What is the border that the Holy Spirit is calling you to cross? Where is the place you had not considered going to before? How is God opening your heart to receive all that he has to give you?