

Paul, Lydia and Me By Holly C. W. Aastuen  
May 9, 2010 Acts 16:9-15

“Notice anything different?”

Words that can strike fear into anyone’s heart.

“Ah, yah,” I say, “Your hair is different.”

“No,” he replies.

“Ah, you got new glasses,” I venture.

“No,” he replies.

I can feel my panic rise and then fall as I become more and more bewildered. Am I really that out of touch with what my partner looks like that I don’t notice when he’s changed?

“No,” he says, “did you notice anything different when you drove up?”

I wrack my brain, trying to remember what the house looked like 5 minutes ago. “You mowed the lawn?” “You pulled the dandelions?” He gets frustrated as I name tasks he has yet to do.

Inevitably I have to give up and confess that I’m not as observant as I could be and then he says something like, “I bought a new trailer. It’s parked right beside the garage.” Or “I cleaned out the garage. Couldn’t you tell?”

Couldn’t he tell me so I wouldn’t have to guess?

Paul, in today’s scripture, noticed something was different. In the passage immediately preceding this morning’s reading, Paul was getting one door after the other slammed in his face. Let me just read to you the two verses before today’s reading:

<sup>6</sup>They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. <sup>7</sup>When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; <sup>8</sup>so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.

So, Paul was blocked ‘by the Spirit’ and ‘the spirit of Jesus’ from Phrygia, Galatia, Bithynia. How exactly that happened we’re not sure, but in any case, Paul is having a string of bad luck.

And then come the events of today’s passage.

Paul has a vision of an anonymous man from Macedonia begging him to come there. He doesn’t say why, he doesn’t say for how long, Paul just had this feeling that he should go to Macedonia. Once he had this clarity of vision things seemed to fall into

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place, no more doors closing on him, he arrives in Philippi, a leading city the district of Macedonia. On the Sabbath they went out of the gate by the river, which apparently, was a common place for people to gather for prayer and they spoke with the women who had gathered there.

One woman, a businesswoman named Lydia, was so taken by the message that she had her household baptized and convinced Paul and those with him to stay in her home.

Isn't it nice when everything falls into place? Paul's vision, though he was in the midst of a string of bad luck, brought him to the blessed place where he could finally do ministry and the people welcomed him.

I gain comfort from the fact that Paul had several failures before he had success in Philippi. It helps me better accept my failures and move on.

Still, I wonder if maybe the success that Paul had was something that came to him because he was Paul and I am not. I keep waiting to hear that clear strong voice, to get that one clarion vision that will set everything right. I keep thinking that if we sit and listen long and hard enough that the ideal way for the future will blaze before us and we can just follow down its path. I keep hoping for a vision, like Paul's, to tell me what to do.

But God rarely works with such clarity, instead choosing to have us seek and find those small bits of wisdom that will guide our way.

But first we need to open our hearts.

Lydia was a woman who was visiting Philippi when her heart was opened to Paul's message.

Though she was described as a worshiper of God (a Gentile who listened to and worshiped Israel's God), her heart was open to a message about Jesus. She was eager to hear what Paul had to say.

What makes us open to new possibilities, new horizons? Do we need to be uncomfortable with who and where we are to be open to new possibilities, or can we simply cultivate such openness?

One of my favorite cartoons was Calvin and Hobbes. Calvin was a young kid who was always getting into trouble and Hobbes was his stuffed tiger who was often the voice of reason.

One day Calvin comes marching into the living room in the early morning. His mother is in her favorite chair, sipping her morning coffee. She looks up and sees young Calvin. His head is encased in a large space helmet, a cape is draped around his neck and dragging out behind him. In one hand he holds a flashlight, in the other a baseball bat.

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“What’s up today?” asks his mom.

“Nothing, so far,” answers Calvin.

“So far?” she asks.

“Well, you never know,” Calvin says, “Something could happen today.” Then Calvin marches off, saying back over his shoulder, “And if anything does, by golly, I’m going to be ready for it!”

Calvin’s mom looks out at the reading audience and says, “I need a suit like that!”

Don’t we all?

We can cultivate a readiness for new directions, new possibilities, even without the cape and the helmet; if we equip ourselves with prayer and study and time to listen, who knows what we might find? We need to open our hearts and minds to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

On Friday, the youth group went to Grand Rios Water Park as their first stop on a weekend of unknown destinations.

In Grand Rios Water Park there are several water slides—I didn’t go down any of them. There is also a large kiddy play area in the middle—didn’t go there either. And making its winding way between the little kids play area and the water slides was something called a Lazy River—I went there and spent hours.

The Lazy River is just that, a meandering shaped river in which you sit or lie on your inner tube and float along with the current. It’s all very peaceful and relaxing. I could spend hours just floating. There’s a challenge, however, and that is when you want to get in the river on the inner tube and when you want to get out. Some people can do this smoothly, but I wasn’t that smooth. When you get off your inner tube you find that the current is amazingly strong and tugs at you, sometimes knocking your feet out from under you. It has a mighty pull to make you go in a certain direction.

You need to get in the river to feel its tug. Once you are flowing with the river, it feels effortless.

I am convinced that the first step to having a vision or dreaming a dream is to step into the river.

When I felt the tug towards full time ministry, I was already in a stream, a church stream, you might call it. I was attending church and church activities 2-3 times a week, I fully engaged in the work of the church as a teenager. I loved hanging out at church and I loved the people there.

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When my pastor told me I ought to be a minister, and I got over the initial shock, it seemed like just another place downstream from where I already was floating. I was already in the stream, I just needed to follow the spirit's lead further down the way.

It's extremely rare for people who aren't in the church to feel the call to ministry, or to have people suggest that they should be a pastor.

You need to be in the stream to catch the vision.

We need to join in the stream of looking at the world through God's eyes, and through joining the stream of daily getting into contact with God so we know what God would have us do.

I am convinced that many of us do not take the time to discern, to listen to God, to get into that God stream because 1. We are afraid, 2. We are distracted, 3. We don't know how to begin.

First of all, we are afraid that if we start asking for God's vision in our lives, we might actually get an answer and then have to act on it. What if it's a direction we've never gone before? How will we do it?

Secondly, we are distracted. I find, time after time, that it is easier to let the immediate needs of emptying the dishwasher and picking up newspapers take over my schedule than to take time to pray and discern.

And finally, we don't know how to begin. How am I supposed to pray and for what? Who can tell me exactly what to do so I don't mess it up?

This summer we'll be entering a God stream of prayer as we pray for the future of the congregation and how we might fit into it. I'm looking forward to getting even more fully into the stream of prayer and seeing what's there. I hope you'll join me with open hearts and open minds to see where God might lead.

Who knows, maybe someday someone will walk into church and someone will say 'notice something new?' And they will say 'something is different here. I wonder what it is.'