

Acts 16 ⁹⁻¹⁶ 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.” ¹⁰When 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. ¹¹We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹²and 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. ¹³On 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. ¹⁴A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper 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. ¹⁵When 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.

What I appreciate about the Book of Acts is throughout the book, the Apostles do not know what country or city or place God will lead them to until it is time to go. In maybe one of the more well known stories, the apostle Philip is taken by the Holy Spirit to a remote place where he meets an Ethiopian who is reading a Jewish scripture. He asks what it’s about, Philip says it’s about Jesus, and the Ethiopian asks to be baptized, and Philip says Let’s do that. To be a worker for God throughout Acts, means you see visions, are taken to places you weren’t expecting to go to do the work of God.

When I was in college I had a friend who was a few years older than me, who came to the college a month after his wife left him. She was gone and she wasn’t coming back. Years later when I took on my first internship, I was talking to him on the phone. He told me more about his experience those first few weeks of college. Most nights, he had horrible nightmares, as he suffered from the pain of his wife leaving. He would wake up and swear he could smell the scent of his wife’s hair on his dorm room pillow.

His arrival at college itself was an unexpected thing for him. He had not mentioned a word about his desire to attend college to his family for years, but was

visiting his grandmother in the nursing home, not even sure if she aware of who he was. She was just flipping through the yellow pages and stopped on an ad. She looked up at him and for no reason at all said “How about Montreat College?, that sounds like a nice place.” This got his attention, so he went to admissions office at nearby Montreat College and they had him admitted with a generous financial aid package. The admissions officer had a compassionate look on his face and said, “I want to help you out.” When he woke up from those horrible nightmares, he said he would quickly turn his thoughts to God and ask for help with the pain. He said the words “Take hold” kept popping into his head. He was to take hold of the opportunities he had in front of him.

He was to accept the things he could not change, do something the things he could. Take Hold.....he heard....Take hold.

Our story today, is just one of the many stories in Acts where it we see that people of God *take hold*. **Paul, Silas, Luke - the apostles in the story, Lydia the new convert in the story. These people see visions, these people take hold, these people respond to God because they are sure that it is God calling them.**

The apostles are ready to go, cross over into Macedonia, because Paul has seen a man standing and begging them to come over in a vision.

As we try to find out what we can take from this story, how we can apply it to our lives, we may find the idea of visions to be problematic. The problem is that when we hear the word vision we often think illusions; like a rainbow. As Presbyterians, we tend to doubt things that sound like mystical experiences.

But maybe as individuals, we are just self-conscious that someone else will doubt us if we say that we think God has spoken to us. George Gallup did a poll among Presbyterians, asking them if they had experienced a vision from God. Half the church members he asked said that they actually had. The reason this statistic may be surprising to you is because we just don't talk about our visions from God. Maybe that is because we want to control the plan like in strategic planning and committees.

Before I had gotten very far with the sermon this week, we had an outreach meeting, where we were thinking about ways our congregation could be more

friendly. I was still thinking about it the next morning when I was heading to a meeting. Then an idea popped into my head, we should have a cookout for the people who live in the academy and our neighbors next door. It was a small idea, “I’ll contact Lee Russell andif it happens it happens.”

As I continued to think about it, I thought we need to take hold of opportunities. We have an opportunity in the academy next door. The people who live there now do not know us very well, except maybe Butch or Harold. Their only contact with this congregation is that when they have a problem, they call the office, or Butch or both. They know us mainly as landlords, but we are more than that.

The idea still sounded good to me. I thought it would probably sound good to the people on Outreach. No big deal, we would put up posters in the academy, have a cookout for them, and maybe meet some new people. No big deal.

Then Thursday came, and I called Lee Russell to ask her what she thought. I called her, and Lee agreed it would be a good idea. “...Maybe we should have it every Tuesday I said.” As I said the words, I thought, that’s too often, I don’t want that responsibility. That could get expensive. What committee budget is that going to come out of? It seemed to be a nice idea, but nothing special.

Soon after I got off the phone with her, I picked up this magazine to get myself in the right frame of mind to word my sermon about this scripture text, I opened it to an article that I saw was about outreach. Oh, this could be good I thought. And these were the first words I read,

“Laura and I stood at the back of her apartment complex, located just behind the church I serve....How about starting a picnic? She suggested.”

What? No way! Are you kidding me?

Wow, I thought I was the only one with idea to have a community picnic. That is really cool. So, I went into the kitchen and told Stephanie about my experience. When I told her, the underlying subtext was, Do you think this is a vision?

A couple minutes later I returned a phone call to my younger brother. He said, “What are you up to?” I just said, “The usual.” I wanted to tell him about the cookout idea, but held back. I asked him what he was up to. He said, “Oh last night, my church had a cookout for an apartment complex. And I had some great conversations with...” I said, “Are you kidding me Tommy? I was just thinking about that as idea for our church, and I picked up an article that turned out to be about another church having a cookout.”

Oh wow, What is going to happen next? Is God going to drop a blanket down from heaven for us and send a bolt of lightening to set the charcoal on fire. Whoah!

I felt charged and challenged. We should do this.

In Acts 16, everyone is ready for God to do his work in unpredictable ways. Paul and the other apostles, go to Philippi after Paul sees the vision. They would normally go to the Jewish temple, to get an opportunity to speak, but there is no Jewish temple in Philippi. It takes 10 Jewish men to start a temple community. So, they hear that some people gather right outside the city to pray. When they go to the city gate, there are some Gentile women there who are praying to God, whom they know from some Jewish acquaintances.

After hearing Paul speak, Lydia says she believes in Jesus and wants to be baptized. The scripture text tells us that she is from Thyatira, where she learned the very lucrative trade of making purple for garments and where there probably were many Jewish temples. Lydia is rich, influential, and ready to use it all for her new found calling of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

After being baptized, she then insists that the apostles come and use her house as the center for worship for any converts that are made in Philippi. She holds nothing back. She was ready for something new; whatever the new Christians would need.

We are all here today because someone took the opportunity to ask us to come or come back. We found our church to be friendly, so we decided we wanted to worship here. But, it is not a guarantee that everyone who walks

through those doors, or drives by the building on a regular basis will have any idea that we are friendly. So, we ourselves, have to take hold.

There isn't anyone in this scripture passage that just sits back and lets things happen for them. The apostles don't wait for converts to come to them. They cross over into unfamiliar Gentile territory to take hold of whatever the Holy Spirit has for them. Lydia doesn't just let things happen. She doesn't wait for the apostles to ask her if she wants to be baptized. She asks for it. She doesn't wait for anyone to ask if they can use her house to meet in as a church; she volunteers it.

Let us take not wait for the people of our neighborhood to come visit us.

Let's go to them. Who thinks I really just want to eat a good hamburger? And who thinks that we are on to something and ready to show hospitality to the people in the academy. But, not just the academy; there are many opportunities in your lives to offer outreach to people. Can you hear the Holy Spirit telling you today, "Take Hold"?