

### When Journeys Intersect

During the season of Easter, we've been hearing how the gospel of Jesus Christ spread and the church grew, through the acts of the Holy Spirit and the actions of the apostles. In today's reading from the book of Acts, we learn of an episode in what people call Paul's second missionary journey. Try to picture the geography as I describe it. Paul and his companion Silas travel around lands on the east end of the Mediterranean Sea, through Syria and what we today call Turkey. They add a young man named Timothy to their group, and eventually end up on the east coast of the Aegean Sea. Macedonia and Greece are across the waters west of them.

As I read, notice how a shift from the third person to the first person plural, "we," adds to the immediacy of the narrative, and helps us to imagine that we are there with them.

#### *Acts 16:9-15*

Most people like to travel: to see new places, experience new cultures, meet new people, and expand our world view. Most people like to travel, whether to see beautiful scenery or the world's great cities, to climb mountains or just to sit on a beach. But more often than not, the world's travelers are not on vacations, but on journeys compelled by other realities. As I described the journey of Paul, were you struck by how similar their route was to the route of millions of Syrian migrants seeking refuge and escape from civil war today? Traveling, journeying, being on the move is part of the human story.

And as such, it is a perennial metaphor for the spiritual life. We journey because we are curious, because we are compelled, and because we are called.

Paul and his companions were called to their journey, called to be on the road to tell the story of Jesus to strangers and hope for the best. Sometimes their preaching offended, and they ended up in prison for disturbing the peace. Sometimes their plans to travel to particular places were thwarted, and the only explanation they could give was that the Holy Spirit prevented them. Sometimes they met receptive people, and sometimes they met hostile people. They learned along the way and sometimes adapted to the culture in which they found themselves. Their journey was a response to a call.

That call was crystal clear when they were on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea, and Paul had a vision of a man saying, "COME OVER TO MACEDONIA AND HELP US!" Well, who wouldn't want to take a cruise on the Aegean? Except that the sea voyage surely wasn't cruise-like, but more like the trips in crowded boats of today's refugees. Yet they went, and found their way to Philippi. The good news of Jesus Christ had arrived in Europe for the first time. What kind of reception would it find?

Paul and his friends spent a few days scoping out the city. But they found the reason for their call outside the city gates, down by the river where apparently there was a gathering place, a synagogue, for the handful of Jews in the area. And because it was the Sabbath, they also went there to pray.

It was probably a small group, for Paul became the rabbi, the teacher for the day in that mixed gathering. And it was by the riverside that his journey intersected with the journey of a woman named Lydia.

She was not a Jew, but a Gentile from Asia Minor, from a city famous for its textile production. Apparently she was an entrepreneur, for she traded in purple cloth in this country across the water from her homeland. And since purple cloth was only for the wealthy, the royal, the upper class, surely she was wealthy, too. Yet her riches weren't enough for her. She was a seeker, on a faith journey because of her curiosity, and she worshiped the God of the Jews. Her journey of faith was about to take a huge leap into a new realm, as a new disciple of Jesus Christ. On that day by the riverside, she was baptized into this new life, along with those of her household. She immediately offered hospitality to Paul and his friends, a practice she surely offered every time they came to town ever after.

I believe it was experiences like this one that helped Paul to write profound truths which are still being quoted two millennia later: There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female, for all are one in Jesus Christ. (Gal 3:28) His letter to the Philippians, written a number of years after this first visit there, is filled with affection, gratitude, and joy. He praises their faith, their love, and their generosity toward him, and sends his greetings to all the saints. Lydia, as the matriarch of the church in Philippi, the first Christian in Europe, set the bar of hospitality high for all who came after. The Philippians still teach us to be generous and welcoming.

What might have happened had their journeys not intersected that day? What if Lydia had rejected the gospel and kept her household away from this strange new teaching? What if Paul had turned away from the call to go to Macedonia, avoiding the danger of the sea voyage? What if Lydia had ignored her curiosity and desire to worship the true God, and stayed in her shop counting up the bolts of fabric and the money in the till? Or going back farther, what if Paul had refused to listen when Christ confronted him on the road to Damascus, the road of persecution of the Christ-followers which ended up being his road to becoming a Christ-follower?

All those contingencies, and more, led to the day when Paul's call met Lydia's curiosity, and both felt compelled to a new life in Christ. All those contingencies, what theology professor Ronald Cole-Turner calls "that long list of improbable events that led to Lydia's encounter with Paul." (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2, 2009, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 474*) All those contingencies, and more, led to the world we live in today, the people we are today, and the faith we follow today. All those contingencies are the "what ifs" of choices along our journeys.

The biblical world view does not include the concept of **fate**, a power that controls what happens in the future. And while we Presbyterians have a reputation from our Calvinist heritage for a doctrine of **predestination**, a reputation which is not very accurate today, even a believer in predestination does not believe that God controls our will and ability to make decisions. A strong belief in the doctrine of **providence**, another characteristically Calvinist notion, sees God's benevolence at work in our daily life. But always we have choices. Always we are free agents, able to make decisions and act on them. The mystery is in the interaction of the Holy Spirit's guidance with our choices, our decision-making. Which comes first, divine leading or human longing? God's grace or human need? God's purposes, or human obedience?

Or is there some interplay, some back and forth which makes our longings an outworking of God's grace in us, and God's plan an evolving one, responsive to the choices we make and the situations in which we find ourselves?

Somehow I think that Lydia and Paul's intersecting journeys were an outgrowth of God's design for the spread of the gospel. And at the same time, God's plan needed human input, human cooperation, and even human creativity. God needed Paul to speak his faith out of his particular soul,

and God needed Lydia to take hold of faith and demonstrate her wholehearted embrace of the gospel so that others would also be joined to this growing household of faith. Our journeys intersect with one another's, and with God's journey through time, on God's mission to reconcile all creation with God.

So we need God, and God needs us, too. To illustrate, consider those on journeys they never would have chosen, the refugees and forcibly displaced persons in the world today, who number more than 60 million people. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-refugees-idUSKBN0U10CV20151218>, 12/18/15) Believers in fate might throw up their hands and say, "what a shame that the world is so cruel." Believers in providence alone might say, "may God bless them and keep them." But those who recognize God's call on our lives are compelled to action. Just two days ago, a father told me about his daughter and her family who are living in Iraq, doing relief work for Syrian and Kurdish and Yazidi refugees under the umbrella of the Christian organization Samaritan's Purse. As a parent, I would find it hard to see my child in such a place these days. But I am in awe of those who obey God's call this way. In my view, they are cooperating with God's will that all people have shelter and food and safety. I believe they are intentionally allowing their faith journey to intersect with God's journey in the world. God's providence works through us. God's will works within us. God's plan needs us.

Jesus taught that to his original disciples. Their journeys started to intersect when he called them to leave their nets and join him on the road. Traveling with him, they saw and heard amazing things—healing, teaching, the forgiveness of sins, exorcisms, even the raising from the dead. But after a while, he sent them out with power and authority over demons and diseases, to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal—just as he had been doing (Luke 9:1-2) Yet even with all this power and authority, they needed to intersect with others who would offer hospitality on their journeys. And when they joined up again, the road they traveled together was to Jerusalem, to Jesus' death. He asked some to stay with him, for he needed them. And though they mostly failed, he called upon them again, to be witnesses to his resurrection.

So it was that on the first Easter day, he rejoined a couple of them on a road, and taught them again about God's mission. And sat down at a table with them. Where their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. (Luke 24:13-35) It's one of the longest, most detailed stories in Luke's gospel, that story of intersecting journeys on the road to Emmaus. Read it again if you're wondering how Jesus might appear in your life, and compel you to a life of deeper faith and action.

Where your story, your journey, intersects with his story, his journey. Where your story, your journey, also intersects with the journey of fellow travelers on his Way. Where all the contingencies of the past converge to call upon the person you are, and the people we are together, to enact God's will for the world. And where we learn to trust our future story, our future journey, to God's saving map.