

“Road (and Sea) Trip!” (Easter 6)
Pastor Hubert Den Draak (Acts 16:9-15)



OK, I have news for you folks. You decide if it's good or bad news: we're all going on a trip! We'll be going in a few weeks. So you'll want to know, if we are leaving Canada, do each of us have a current passport? Do we also need a visa? And, if we're going to fly, how do we get the best price on our tickets? And what will the weather like? We don't want to be too cold, or too hot and we don't want to waste space packing stuff we don't need. So many decisions!

But - what if I told you that we're going... *right now*; no time to go home first and water the plants or feed the cat or cancel the paper or tell your neighbours. Oh, and did I mention you have no idea what you'll eat for supper or where you'll sleep tonight?

Not many of us would take a trip like that; in reality not many of us *could*. We have jobs that expect us to show up on Monday morning or for our next shift. Some of us have children to get ready for school, family matters to attend to, and a whole list of other real obligations. Sure, if this was a crisis we'd make the time; but otherwise, we'd have to take a rain check on this trip.

So instead, we'll make an *imaginary* trip, to... the Mediterranean Sea. You'll find it between Europe and the north coast of Africa. In the time of Jesus and the early Christian movement, the Romans called it "Our Sea", "Mare Nostrum", because they controlled all the countries around it; it was one a huge empire.

Last week we heard about the apostle Peter's vision, or dream, which deeply changed the way the Christian church formed itself. In today's passage from the book of Acts, it's the apostle Paul who has a vision: a vision of someone from far-away Macedonia who urges him to "Come over to Macedonia and help us!"

You need to know that Paul was in Troas at that point, already over 1000 km from home. This extra trip to Neapolis in Macedonia would take many days, and would be tough and risky. It required several stops along the way to take on or drop off passengers and get new supplies of food and water, or wait out bad weather. And

all that, just because of some... dream?! You have to give it to Paul: he sure is open to going where he be

In Paul's days, there were significant Jewish communities living in Diaspora, people who had fled Jerusalem after its first destruction. They lived all over the Roman empire. There were probably more Jews living outside of Israel than within it. And no matter where they lived, they all went to the Synagogue for weekly worship on the Sabbath.

Scholars are pretty sure that there was at least one synagogue in Neapolis; yet for some reason, on the Sabbath, Paul goes to a place which, he was told, was a place where people gathered to pray. It's a small group, and unusual, too: because they are all... women.

These women who gathered for prayer are not identified as Jewish or Christian. What religion they followed, we do not know. We only know that this riverbank was "a place of prayer". But we do know that Lydia, their leader, shows an openness to the message that Paul brings about Jesus. Think of her as what some churches these days call a "seeker", someone who is "spiritual, but not religious".

And by the way, did you notice how vague this whole Bible passage is? It has a lot of unknowns, question marks, a lot of "mystery". Most of us don't like mystery, we prefer hard facts, we want to know what's going on and why. But that's not how God works, is it? The Holy Spirit is powerful in this story, taking Paul outside of his comfort zone. And Paul is aware of it; so instead of resisting and doing what he has always done (going to the synagogue to worship), he follows the Spirit, open to what might happen next. And what happens next, is... Lydia.

It's interesting to note that Lydia who seems to be the leader of this group is not only a woman, she is a woman of business and that she is in charge of an entire household. Household in those days included not only the extended family, but also servants and slaves, and easily count 25 to 30 people - or more.

In an era in which men controlled commerce, and households and society in general, she is a leader - where one would expect her to be a follower. Clearly, this is no ordinary woman! And her profession confirms it: she is a dealer in purple cloth, which was extremely expensive to manufacture. Only the super-rich, like kings and emperors could afford to wear purple robes. And here she meets Paul,



Mosaic of Emperor Justinus,
wearing a purple robe.

a representative of a king, albeit a very different one. And she gets it. She sees the meaning of their encounter.

So what has happened is, first, the Spirit takes Paul out of his comfort zone - and next, it opens Lydia's heart and mind to the Good News of Jesus.

The text tells us that she became a believer and she and all in her household were baptized. She became their hostess, and her house became a base of operations for the new church in that part of the Roman empire. This Lydia is a most extraordinary woman with a great deal of influence, who would become one of Paul's key associates.

So what does this story say to us, all these years later? This story of a man who makes it a point to be "tuned into" the Spirit; which effectively means dialling down his own expectations and to step outside of his familiar routines. This story of how that brings together two very different people from different cultures, different faiths, different ways of working. This story of how the Spirit finds a way to connect these two and creates something that's bigger than just the sum of its parts. These amazing things happen when we dare to let go of our own agenda and say, it's over to you God. Tell me what to do - and I'll do it.

But there's even more to that story. It echoes last week's story, about the vision another apostle had, Peter. Last week's and this week's stories are about the importance of accepting others for who they are. Accepting that God wants us to welcome *everyone*, regardless of background and traditions, just the way they are. Even if they aren't quite the way you would like. Maybe they have a different colour skin. Maybe they're gay or have a different accent. Maybe they have mental difficulties, or maybe they worship in a different way. This week's message echoes last week's: God wants us to welcome *everyone*, saints *and* sinners.

Being welcoming starts with little things. Here at Pinegrove, it starts with wearing a name tag, so new folks can connect a name to a face. It starts with making an effort to strike up a conversation with a new person, get to know her or him, see what you can learn from that person. It starts with inviting a neighbour or a friend

to come to church with you because you think it might do them some good, they might feel welcome here.

It also starts with a different mindset when we discuss new outreach initiatives like Café del Soul. If you feel indifferent or even a little critical about it, try seeing it through the lens of today's story, and think of it as the Spirit inviting us to go out of our comfort zone. Think of it as an opportunity to meet very different people who we otherwise would never have met, like Paul and Lydia. And see where the Spirit will take it next; for I guarantee you it will.

This passage reminds us that outreach of any kind involves *two* people willing to try something new - Paul had to take a long and risky journey, and Lydia had to be open to the new spiritual truth in the message of the Good News about Jesus from Nazareth.

So let's allow God to be God, and let's be open to new ways of being church and being Christian; let's be open to new people, let's entertain some new ideas. It may be the Spirit that's calling us to another Macedonia, or it may be calling another Paul to come to us.

This story invites us to be open to the faith journey that the winds of the Spirit can take us on. So how do we feel about it...? Are we up to it - or do we prefer to stay put? The choice is ours alone.

Amen.