

Expect the Unexpected

Acts 16:9-15
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First Presbyterian Church
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"I am a disciple of Christ. I will not let up, look back or slow down. My past is redeemed, my future secure. I am done with low living, small planning, smooth knees, mundane talking and small goals. My fate is set; my goal is sure! My road is narrow and rough. I am a disciple of Christ. I must go until he comes, speaking of all I know of him, and work until he stops me."

That was the final journal entry of an unknown pastor in Southeast Africa who was martyred for his faith.¹ We are all disciples of Christ, and our past is redeemed; our future secure. But how many of us are willing to put it all on the line for our faith, if even just for a moment, just in a small way?

Few if any of us are called to be a martyr, to die for our faith. But we are called to set aside things that get in the way of us embracing and expressing our faith. The Apostle Paul is a great model for us to follow in taking even little steps in that direction, in sharing our faith in a way that brings others closer to God.

As we heard last week, Paul started out a Pharisee named Saul who was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." (Acts 9:1) After accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior, Paul embarked on his calling to "Go ... and make disciples of all nations," all people (Matt. 28:19), a calling we share as followers of Christ.

So let's see what we can learn from Paul's travels through life. Acts tells us that Paul had a vision of "a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'" Right there we see the first thing that's needed to be a follower of Christ – the desire to help others. We all share that desire, don't we? Yeah. We want to help people, and so did Paul, eager to go where he was called. "When he had seen the vision," Acts tells us Paul and his traveling companions "immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called (them) to proclaim the good news to them," to the people of Macedonia.

What we don't see in today's reading is that Macedonia was not on Paul's travel plans. It's not where he expected to end up when he headed out in the first place. Paul was planning to stop at the very next place they reached. But Acts tells us the Holy Spirit led them on an unexpected journey. Not being allowed to stop where he wanted, Paul decided to travel northeast. And again the Spirit doesn't allow it (Acts 16:6-7). And that's when Paul has the vision, a vision calling them to go further than they expected, all the way to Macedonia, which is modern-day Europe.

¹ <https://www.homileticsonline.com/members/installment/93040429>

The point is, we head out each day with certain expectations. We have a destination in mind, someplace we want to go or something we want to get done. And of course, life happens and we get sidetracked. Like Paul, we get sidetracked. But what if getting sidetracked is really just being redirected by the Lord? Interesting to consider, right?

Have you ever considered that the time you spend stuck in the checkout line, waiting in the doctor's office, dealing with a broke-down car, or helping a friend who suddenly interrupts your plans – that all these unexpected delays might just be God opening up a new possibility for you, for your day?

As Paul sets out for Macedonia – with his initial plans interrupted through some inexplicable work of the Holy Spirit – he and his travel companions are in for a world of possibility, literally. They arrive in Philippi, which Acts tells us “is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony.” Yay! They've made it. Now what?

Good question. How many times in any given day do we find ourselves asking, “Now what?” You get done with a project; now what? You get home from work or school or running errands; now what? You come to the end of your career; now what? Graduate from school; now what?

For Paul, Philippi was not his destination, but it was where the Lord took him. So he's there; now what? I'll tell you what. Acts says they “remained in (the) city for some days.” That's it. They simply remained where God put them. Paul and his friends sat there waiting. Just sat there waiting.

How many times do we find ourselves just sitting there waiting? It's frustrating, right? Do you think Paul ever got as frustrated as we do? When he reached Philippi and had all that unexpected downtime, don't you think he was a little uneasy about it? Sure he was.

But finally, the day comes when they have something to do. It's the Sabbath day. Acts tells us, “On the Sabbath day (they) went outside the (city) gate by the river, where (they) supposed there was a place of prayer.... (They) sat down and spoke to the women ... gathered there.” Well, this was an unexpected encounter. Paul wasn't looking for a group of women to talk to, he was looking for a prayer meeting. But that's who God put along his path. Which begs the questions, who has God put along your path? Who might you be called to speak to on behalf of Jesus, offering a word of encouragement and hope, an expression of kindness and generosity, a suggestion that might lead to blessings and joy?

Think about it. It may not be someone you would expect to reach. It may in fact be someone you wish you'd never met. For Paul, it was a woman named Lydia, someone he would never expect to reach, never expect to care about what he had to say.

After all, Acts tells us Lydia “was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth.” Thyatira was a well-known textile city, and purple was the color of wealth and royalty. Lydia has a very self-sufficient successful career and plenty of money. She owns her own home and runs her own business. Very self-sufficient. This is probably the last person Paul would expect to listen to care about what Jesus has to offer to him. And yet, says Acts, “The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.”

We never know who will be open to hearing a word of encouragement and hope, kindness and generosity, blessing and joy. It could even be someone you know who seems to have it all. It’s one of those unexpected journeys in life, with unexpected delays and sidetracks, leading to an unexpected encounter, with unexpected results, like for Paul. Thanks to Paul, Lydia and her entire household were baptized! She becomes the first Christian in all of Europe and her home becomes a major hub of Christianity. And this is a place Paul never intended to go. Think about it. These are the people who received Paul’s Letter to the Philippians some 2,000 years ago, a letter that still teaches us today about hardship, humility, love, service, hope beyond suffering, and God’s glory.

We all know something of hardship, humility, love, service, hope beyond suffering, and the glory of God. Isn’t that worth sharing with someone? But where are we expected to do that – to touch the heart of another individual in such a way that it opens up a world of possibilities?

Well, probably somewhere along an unexpected journey, with unexpected delays, during an unexpected encounter, with the last person you’d expect to be open to what God has put in your heart to share.

Take a moment right now to think about who that person might be for you, or where during your weekly routine you might have such an encounter with someone. Can you think of someone, someplace?

OK, once you have someone or someplace in mind, think of a way that Jesus has touched your heart, something that you could share with another person. Write it down – just a word or two to bring it to mind – and then put that slip of paper in your pocket or purse. Use it to remind you of what Jesus means to you, what your faith has made possible in your life. And then be ready to share it the next time you encounter someone unexpectedly. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, we celebrate the many gifts which you bestow upon your people. We also reflect upon the challenging call to live as a new creation in Christ.

We recognize and embrace the blessing and call to service in Christ's resurrection.

God of the Church, your apostles were persecuted for the sake of the gospel. Such suffering continues today in the face of human cruelty and intolerance.

We pray for all who are persecuted for the sake of their faith and political beliefs. Strengthen the work of organizations which seek to overcome injustices.

God of righteousness, empower us weak-willed human beings to be faithful to the promises made in affirming our baptisms: to reject Satan and all his empty promises.

Help us to discern your will and turn from our own selfish desires.

God of justice, your Son began his ministry proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God, in which the blind are given sight and the oppressed released from bondage.

Give us grace to enact the vision of that kingdom, by living lives of service that are dedicated to justice.

God of those who struggle and suffer, be with those battling illness, those recovering from surgery, those struggling in any way, and the friends and family who stand nearby with a helping hand.

God of all people, it is both a gift and a responsibility to have Christ dwelling in us. Let us be truly grateful and willing to live as one with the Lord.

We pray all this in the name of our Risen Savior, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.