

First Reading: Psalm 67

- ¹ May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
² that your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.
³ Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
⁴ Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.
⁵ Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
⁶ The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God, has blessed us.
⁷ May God continue to bless us;
let all the ends of the earth revere him.

Second Reading: Acts 16:6-15

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷ When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; ⁸ so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ When 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.

¹¹ We therefore set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and 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. ¹³ On 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. ¹⁴ A 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. ¹⁵ When 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.

Prayer of Illumination

Sermon: Surprise!

We've spent the last several weeks exploring the book of Acts, considering the surprising work of God in the early church and how God continues to be at work in us, the church in 2022 in Lewistown, MT.

We've seen God's big, grand acts. We've heard of Peter's miraculous jail break and his new boldness. We've heard how Saul's life turned-upside-down when a bright light and a voice from heaven came to him on the road to Damascus. We've heard of Peter's imitation of Jesus and the power he had to raise a woman from the dead. We've heard of Peter's vision, the opening of a new menu, and the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church.

And if we were to read Acts from beginning to end, those stories would offer just a glimpse of all that God is doing in and through the early church. People's lives are being changed. People are coming to believe. The message of Jesus' life, death and resurrection is spreading. And that is good news!

God is working in big, miraculous ways to build the church. And God is using a ragtag bunch of followers to do so. We've seen how God once surprised the early church, then we've prayed that God would do the same more than 2,000 years later for us, God's church here in Lewistown, MT. In fact, my desk is quite literally covered in those prayers.

And this morning I planned to continue this series, to speak of God's big, bold, unexpected and sometimes crazy work.

But as the news of the week unfolded. As I heard of students and teachers alike scared to go to school. As I've heard questions about where we go from here. And as I listened to this community wonder where God is in the midst of a life ending far too soon. Where God is in the midst of grief and unbearable pain. I realized that maybe I needed to go somewhere else this morning.

And I considered changing my text altogether, but something kept me here in Acts 16. Except instead of walking through the whole story, as we normally do, I want to jump to the end.

Our text introduces us to a woman named Lydia...and truthfully, we don't know all that much about this woman. We know that she is a worshipper of God, she was from the city of Thyatira, and she was a dealer in purple cloth.

What that means is that Lydia is very likely not a Jew. But she is a woman of at least some wealth and prestige. A rarity in her day for sure.

And on a Sabbath morning, Lydia went to a river, outside the gates of Philippi, to pray. Perhaps she went expecting to meet others, or perhaps she went hoping to be alone. Perhaps she went to that place regularly or perhaps only occasionally. It doesn't really matter.

But on this particular sabbath day, there was a stranger there. A man named Paul, and she heard that he had arrived in the city just a few days earlier.

And Paul spoke to Lydia, and to the other women who were there too, about a man named Jesus. We don't know exactly what Paul said, but we can imagine. We can imagine that Paul spoke about God's love for the world, a love so great that God sent God's only Son to earth as a baby. About Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. About God's work of bringing all people, regardless of social status, gender, or ethnicity, into one family. About a call to follow God here and now. About the abundant life that God intends for God's people.

Whatever Paul said, Lydia listened with excitement and with an open heart. And at some point, Lydia was so moved by Paul's words that she wanted to be baptized, and then she urged Paul and his companions to stay with her in Philippi for some time.

Lydia might have been seeking God, but there, at the riverside, God found Lydia.

Here's the thing, in the midst of all the big, grand, surprising acts of God, the author of Acts pauses to tell the story of one woman. Because this one woman, this one life, matters to God. Lydia, a seeker, a dealer of purple cloth mattered to God.

Not because she was wealthy. Not because was particularly special. But simply because God loved her. And God is a God who seeks after all people, simply because we are all created by God, and we are all loved by God.

But what strikes me, and I think what kept me in this text all week, is that this moment almost didn't happen. At countless moments in the story, something could have been different, and Paul and Lydia would have never met. Lydia never would have been believed. And Lydia never would have been baptized.

But God didn't let get anything get in the way of finding Lydia and meeting her at the river outside the gates of Philippi.

But let's back up.

The bulk of our text focuses on this man named Paul. You might recall that Paul was once named Saul. And it was Saul who Jesus met on the road to Damascus with a bright light and a voice from heaven. And before that, you might recall, Saul was best known for his involvement in the persecution, and even murder, of believers. But in an unlikely turn of events God spoke to Saul, Saul came to believe, and eventually Saul became Paul.

And Paul played a sort of unique role in the early church. While much of Peter's work focused on Jerusalem, and the immediately surrounding areas, Paul went outside that region and began spreading the message of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection to every part of the known world. Paul was responsible for fulfilling Jesus' commission to go to the ends of the earth.

Except Paul's travels and Paul's work caused trouble. Because most of Paul's travels took him into Gentile territory, that is not Jewish territory. And as Paul proclaimed the good news of the Gospel and those Gentiles came to believe and be baptized.

The problem was, they weren't Jewish. And that meant they didn't adhere to the same lifestyle of the Jews...they weren't circumcised, they ate different foods, they interacted with different people. They were not part of the nation of Israel that God had set apart from all the other nations, who God had called to be God's very people, and whom God had given particular instructions about how they were to live because they were God's chosen people.

And so, there was a huge question about whether or not someone who came to believe in Jesus must first become a Jew. It was largely question of circumcision, but really it touched on every part of their life together.

Eventually there was a big council in Jerusalem, and they debated this very issue. Eventually they decided "that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God." In other words, they came to recognize Jew and Gentile as equals in God's church.

And so, Paul continued to travel, spreading the gospel message to every corner of the known world. And at some point in his travels, Paul and his companions made a plan to go to Asia. But the Spirit forbid them from going there. And then, they try to go Bithynia, but the Spirit forbid them from going there too.

And that seems awfully strange because Paul was spreading the good news. Paul was fulfilling Jesus' own instructions to go from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. But Acts is clear that the Spirit forbid Paul and his companions from going to Asia and to Bithynia.

And then, while trying to discern where to go next, Paul has a vision of "a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'"

And so, Paul and his companions set off...they travel from Troas and straight to Samothrace, then to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi. The point of this sailing itinerary is simply to make clear that they are on an extended journey far from home.

And now in Philippi, they find themselves in the leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony...it's Paul's first venture into what we call Europe, which was yet another step in the spreading of the gospel "to the ends of the earth."

But Paul was only there because he paid attention to the prompting of the Spirit. At any moment, Paul could have ignored the Spirit and set out on his planned journey.

And not just that, but Paul's vision was of a man, and after several days in the city, Paul hadn't found a man in Macedonia in need of help.

And so, on the sabbath day Paul decided to go outside of the city, to a river, where he met Lydia, a woman. And well, we've already heard the rest of the story.

It almost didn't happen. Paul almost didn't meet Lydia. In fact, if just one thing had been different, if God hadn't spoken to Saul on the road to Damascus, if Saul had rejected God's message, if the believers in Jerusalem had decided that Paul was wrong, if Paul hadn't been allowed to continue his travels, or if Paul had ignored the prompting of the Spirit and gone to Asia or to Bithynia, then Paul would never have been at that riverside to meet Lydia.

God's hand was in it all. From beginning to end. God's hand was in it all, even when it might have been otherwise.

Yes, Paul committed himself to be at God's disposal, to be guided, sensitively attuned to being steered in one direction. And yes, Lydia was first a worshiper of God, a seeker, one who was open to God's presence.

But even though there were elements of human obedience, it was God who guided every step and worked in and through all things so that Paul and Lydia would meet on that sabbath day at the river. When everything seemed impossible, when there was every reason for it not to happen, God was still working. Even when it might have been otherwise.

Because God stopped at nothing to meet Lydia, one woman at the river, outside the gates of Philippi.

And I find hope in that. I find hope in this strange story in the middle of Acts not just because it reminds me that one life matters, but also because it reminds me that even when everything seems impossible, even when there seems to be no hope, God is somehow still working.

At countless moments in this story, it could have been otherwise. But it wasn't. Because God's hand was in it.

The promise is this: even when it seems like pain and evil and brokenness will prevail, God is at work.

After all, it was out of nothing that God created everything. It was from one seemingly random family that God created a nation. It was after 400 years of silence that God chose one woman to bear God's Son, who was named Immanuel, God with us. And it was God's only Son that God sent into the world, with all its problems, with all its sin, and with all its challenges.

At countless moments in God's story, it could have been otherwise. But it wasn't. Because God stopped at nothing to reach us, God's beloved creation.

And that doesn't take away the pain that we feel in this moment. That doesn't take away our questions and our grief. It doesn't solve all the world's problems.

But we don't worship a God who simply fixes problems. We don't worship a God who hangs out somewhere with a magic wand to wave whenever God might feel like it or in whatever situation might need it.

Instead, we worship the God who shows up in the middle of all the pain and suffering and sickness and grief, who comforts those who suffer, who visits us with dreams and visions and insights, and who guides and directs our paths, as unlikely as they may seem.

We worship a God who stops at nothing to find us. It's the words of the great old song, "There ain't no mountain high enough; ain't no valley low enough, ain't no river wide enough, to keep me from getting to you."

It's the words of the psalmist, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day for darkness is as light to you."

There is nowhere that we can go that God will not find us. There is nowhere we can run where God will not chase us down. And nothing will stop God from getting to us.

That doesn't mean there won't be pain. There will be times when it seems that God is far off and distant from the struggles of this world. Times when we look out at all that is happening and wonder where in the world God is.

And I acknowledge that is a hard place to be. I have felt that myself this week as I have grieved with our nation and as I have grieved with our community.

And I confess that I do not have the perfect answer. But I do believe that God hasn't stopped seeking us. And I have to trust that God is working even when it appears to be otherwise.

That's not to say the events of this last week were God's will. I DO NOT believe that. But I do believe in a God who overcame death. I believe in a God who is active in our lives and in our world. I believe that nothing can separate us from the love of God. And I believe that God never stops pursuing us.

Those beliefs doesn't save us by somehow helping us float above the sufferings of the world or even by removing us from the struggles in our lives; but it saves us by helping us endure, because we remain confident that as God has acted in the past, so also will God act in the present and in the future.

And sometimes that is difficult to hold onto alone, but I believe something powerful happens when we come together, when we lift our voices in prayer and in song together. Even when we feel like we have nothing to offer, I believe that God meets us in this place. And somehow, we come to believe together, we hold onto faith for each other when individually we might not have much to give.

The prophet Isaiah writes, "I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and for the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love."

And so, perhaps, when we look at our lives or at the world and it seems that nothing is as it should be, perhaps it is our call to be those people who remember what God has already done. To recount the ways that God has been faithful in our lives and in the lives of those we love. And so then be confident that somehow, in some way, God is at work orchestrating our lives in ways we can't yet see.

It doesn't have to be a complicated practice; in fact, it can be rather simple. The poet Jane Kenyon puts it this way:

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.
At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.

We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

We know all too well that for some this week it was otherwise. And I'm not going to stand here and try to explain why. But I will stand here with the promise, God's isn't finished yet.

God will never stop seeking us. And there is nothing that will stand in God's way of reaching us.

And so, I end with Paul's words in Romans, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Question: God cares about the one person, and so who is the one person you want to lift before God in prayer.