

I wanted to talk this morning about Lydia – I was *excited* to talk about Lydia this morning. What’s not to admire about her? Lydia is successful, independent, courageous and faithful. She’s one of the women called by name throughout Luke and Acts who subsequently never gets mentioned in the church (except maybe every 3 years on the lectionary cycle IF someone chooses to preach this passage). Today was going to be the day to talk about Lydia. Because here’s the thing, if you are of European descent as many of us are, you have Lydia to thank for the legacy of faith. She is the first European convert to Christianity. That makes her story particularly special. Except every time I tried to write about Lydia, I got absolutely nowhere. Seriously. We’re talking re-write on Monday, re-write on Monday night, re-write on Tuesday morning and another on Tuesday night. I would start and then find myself at a dead end. I changed sermon titles, hymns, outlines, and still nothing. I’d walk away, try again, but nope, nowhere. Today’s not going to be about Lydia. It went in a completely different direction from what I anticipated. This sermon is in fact, Plan B. Ironic. Because what kept drawing me from this passage wasn’t Lydia’s story, it was Paul’s – specifically the events leading up to his dream about a man from Macedonia. These few verses aren’t even technically part of today’s lesson, usually bypassed by people focusing either on Timothy joining the team in the preceding verses or Paul traveling to Philippi following his dream. But in these few verses, I think we find something we all can relate to.

Going to Macedonia wasn’t Paul’s plan; it wasn’t even his Plan B. Paul’s missionary travels had thus far kept him close to home. He traveled only short distances by boat; most was done on foot. Paul’s got a new crack team with him and his next step was to take the gospel to Asia, the western coast of Turkey. But everywhere Paul and his team traveled, they hit road blocks and dead ends. They proceeded north, up through Galatia, and then west into the region of Phrygia. As New Testament scholar Tom Wright points out, that’s quite some way – a couple of hundred miles. And 200 miles on foot takes 2-3 weeks at the very least. They came to north-west Turkey and Paul figured God wanted them to go into Bithynia. Wrong again. At that point there’s only one other place to go, Troas. But that’s in Asia and they’ve already been told not to preach there. Everything Paul planned was not working. What exactly were they supposed to do now?

Paul and his team are trying to be faithful – trying to spread God’s good news across their land. Paul thought he had a plan; a good one at that, at least in theory. But in the middle of the night, Paul receives Plan B as he dreams about an unknown man from Macedonia. Paul wanted to conquer Turkey. God sends him to an entirely different continent. Paul wants to make more disciples in the Eastern land. God wants disciples in Europe. Across the Aegean, beyond the borders of “home,” Paul and his team head in the opposite direction than they intended. They were off to Europe.

After arriving in the region (modern-day Greece), as per his usual pattern, Paul and his team go first to the leading city of the area, this time, Philippi. Once he arrived in a city, he would typically head straight to where the Jews worshiped, which usually meant the local synagogue. But Philippi doesn’t even have a synagogue. Yet another road block! After asking around, Paul and his companions find a spot along the river where there seems to be an informal place of worship. When they arrive at the river for the prayer gathering, they find a group that’s mostly women and not even all Jewish women at that. Nothing about Philippi seems to fit with the typical pattern! Of course once Paul met Lydia, the way forward cleared. Lydia heard the good news, asked to be baptized, and then extended a hand of hospitality. She invited the four men into her household, providing Paul and his team a home base as they worked in Philippi. Finally, after weeks and weeks, miles and miles, Paul can get back to work.

Still, I can imagine the weeks leading up to this encounter with Lydia had Paul and his whole team confused, weary, and frustrated.

Every year since the early 1800s, Oxford and Cambridge Universities hold a boat race along the Thames River. It’s quite the rivalry – and quite a major event for the 2 schools. This year, Cambridge won the men’s race. But the drama came in the women’s race – and this race has more than intrigued me. Less-than-ideal weather conditions and rough waters sent both crews in a panic trying to keep water out of the boat and the boat on course. They literally were rowing and rowing without getting anywhere. And the more they rowed the more water the boats took in. In an inspired move, Oxford managed to move their boat from the middle of the Thames to the northern shoreline, finding smoother waters and thus, a victory. It wasn’t the race either team planned on – it was

a Plan B in action. For once, the race results weren't the only focus. Most of the coverage centered on the struggle of the race itself, and on the courage it took from both teams to finish the race.

Anyone ever been in that boat? Rowing hard and getting nowhere? Having to change courses in the middle of the race? Have you ever felt like Paul, where every step you took, you hit a road block? That point when you look around and nothing seems to be going the way you planned, the way you expected it to. As Tom Wright points out, "It's one thing to trust God's guidance when it's actually quite obvious what to do next. It's something else entirely when you seem to be going on and on up a blind alley."

How many of us can look at our lives and say with confidence, yep, everything's turned out just the way I planned? Instead, I imagine most of us feel as if we've lived much of our lives in the middle of Plan B – or C or D or Z. Going to Furman wasn't my plan. Going to seminary certainly wasn't my first plan. Starting a doctorate at this point? Nope, not exactly what I had in mind. We've all had times – days, weeks, or even seasons – where, like Paul, no matter what we try, we hit dead end after dead end. And in the midst of those wanderings, we can feel our faith slipping. We are rowing in choppy water as hard as we can and not getting anywhere at all. Health issues, deaths, divorce, a car that breaks down, trouble at work, issues at home...we're constantly changing courses, on to Plan B before we can even get going with Plan A. Where is God in the middle of all of this wandering? Where is God in the dead ends, the road blocks, the detours?

Here's where these few verses in Acts get me. I find great comfort in the idea that Paul and his companions wandered – on foot, no less – for weeks, trying to be faithful to God and yet still not sure where to go. It's comforting to know that we are not alone when we feel as if we are getting nowhere. It's unfortunate our storyteller glosses over these weeks and weeks of frustrating wandering, covering the hundreds of miles in just 3 short, vague verses. These miles get lost between major events but the reality of our lives is that we spend far more time doing exactly what these verses describe. Trying hard to be faithful to God's call – never sure if we're moving at all. Despite the simplicity and lack of details in these short verses, what they do NOT say is incredibly important. The 200 miles across Turkey were not signs of Paul's lack of faith or disobedience to God. These miles were not judgments against Paul or anyone on his team. And the miles were not considered wasted or failure. Again, this wasn't judgment, it wasn't an intentional testing, it wasn't wasted, and it wasn't a sign of failure. In fact, I think those miles represent quite the opposite. Paul keeps going, he keeps walking, he keeps trying despite the obstacles. He goes to Plan B, to Plan C, to Plan whatever, faithfully moving onward no matter the detour or road block. And so each step he takes is a step of faith and faithfulness, even when he may have nothing to show for it.

Martin Luther King Jr once said, "Faith is being willing to take the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." Faith is continuing to walk even when you don't know where you are going. Faith is continuing to move even when you have turn around and backtrack. Faith is continuing to walk when you have to take detour into uncharted water. It is about rowing as hard as you can even when your boat seems to not be moving at all. Faithfulness to God isn't about the accomplishments or the successes, it's about the journey. These verses are why Paul can later write to the church at Corinth, "We walk by faith and not by sight."

So if you feel as if you are aimless, as if you are hitting too many road blocks or dead ends - here's the good news. Having to move to Plan B is not a sign of failure. Wandering is not wasted. Grace – God's abundant, redeeming, sustaining grace – abounds *in* the wandering. Grace is not a goal we reach nor a destination we must try to find – it is God's gift that sustains us along the way. Like Paul, we are called to keep walking even when we aren't sure where to go, to journey on by faith and not by sight. But in the midst of our wanderings, we meet God here, at this table this morning, a break in the journey, a time of renewal and refreshment. We come to this table knowing God is already here waiting for us. Here in this bread and in this juice, we receive grace for our journey, journeys that are direct, journeys that are slow and arduous, journeys that put us on Plan B. Here at this table we are reminded of the faithfulness of our God who will not abandon us at any point along the way. Come this morning and be strengthened. Come this morning and find rest. Come this morning and be encouraged. Come and meet God here.