

Sermon for July 30, 2017
A Summer of Heroes: "Lydia, a Dealer in Hope"

Acts 16:11-15

Paul was a man with a plan! He had a method that worked and he worked that method. Paul was a trained and certified Pharisee who studied under the great teacher Gamaliel. He used his credentials to full effect. When Paul came to a town, he would go to the synagogue. And on the Sabbath he would preach. He would show the people, with his Greek oratory skills and his Jewish biblical knowledge, that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah and they should believe in him.

The plan usually worked. Some of the people believed him and became followers of Jesus. Some did not and sometimes he was beaten or jailed. Sometimes the Gentiles got upset because he was an "atheist;" meaning he did not believe in the gods, but in only one God.

In the end he would leave a fledgling congregation made up of Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus. This worked well in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. Then in the beginning of chapter 16 of Acts, Paul has a dream. A man of Macedonia is calling for Paul to come. He takes it as a message from God to take the gospel to Greece. So he sets out across the sea.

Paul had a plan and a method so when he arrived in Philippi, his first stop in Macedonia, he applied his method and worked the plan. Philippi was a major city and a Roman colony so it would be a good place to launch out from to the rest of Greece. Step 1: go to the local synagogue. Uhh, what synagogue? I am sure he checked the internet and the phone book and asked around in the market. There was no Synagogue in Philippi. It took 10 Jewish men to establish a synagogue, so there must not have been 10 Jewish men in the city.

Most people would have packed up and moved to the next town at this point. But Paul decided to go looking for the Jews that were there. There may not be a synagogue, but there might be some faithful Jews. If there were, tradition says they would gather by the river on the Sabbath to pray.

So Paul heads to the river on the Sabbath to find some people to witness to. All they found was a group of women. In a day and age when women didn't have much say and were often over looked, most would have moved on. But Paul sits down, the posture of a rabbi about to teach, and speaks with the women. Paul, who often gets bad press for this attitudes toward women, treats them as he would have any men present.

In that small band of woman was a woman named Lydia. We don't know a lot about Lydia. We are told she was a "believer in God." That meant that she was a Gentile who believed in the one true God. We are also told that she is a seller of purple. She was a business woman. Purple cloth was a luxury, so she was probably well to do. We also discover that she is the head of a household.

Lydia listens to Paul and comes to believe in Jesus. She and her whole household are baptized becoming the first known converts to Christianity in Europe. This household would have included relatives, but also any servant or employees in the house. She then opens her home to Paul and his fellow evangelist/travelers. There may not be a synagogue in Philippi, but Lydia's home became a base of operations.

We may not have a full biography on Lydia, but we do know that she was a woman of hope. As a Gentile woman in Greece what hope did she have of living a life in devotion to the strange God of the Hebrews who were half a world away. Especially without a synagogue in town, but in hope Lydia sought out other believers and they made do. What hope did she a women have of learning from a rabbi when there were no men around for the rabbi to talk to, but she hoped and listened. What hope did she have of living this new fledgling faith in Jesus the Anointed one, the Christ, without a community? But she hopefully opened her heart and home and it became the church in Philippi.

Lydia was in a hopeless situation. But she placed her hope in God. And God did not disappoint her. The Bible calls her a “dealer in purple,” but her story shows that she was a dealer in hope. She hoped and God did not let her down. Her hope gave hope to Paul in a seemingly hopeless situation. In the end a town that might have been bypassed became a thriving church as can be seen in Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

When you face a hopeless situation, remember Lydia. God specializes in hopeless situations. The Almighty is a God who did not give up on the human race. God created the human race in God’s own image, yet the things the human race did were far from godly. The humans murdered and stole and worshipped idols. At one point early on God was even sorry to have created us.

Yet God reached out to the human race through Sarah and Abraham and Israel and the prophets and then finally by coming in the flesh in Jesus. God came to us in the hopelessness of our sin and offered us grace. And Jesus took a ragtag group of disciples and by the power of the Holy Spirit made them a church. God gave hope to a hopeless world!

The Greek word for “hope” also means: “expectation, trust, confidence.” Lydia trusted in the Lord. She had an expectation that if she waited on the Lord, then the Lord would guide her. So she confidently went to the river to pray. And God did not let her down. There was no synagogue, but she was led to some faithful women. Then God gave Paul a dream that led him to her.

No matter how hopeless your situation is, trust in the Lord. Like Lydia, wait on the Lord. Trust that God will take care of you. Be confident that God will lead you and provide for you.

Hope in the Lord! I have been in some churches that were in seemingly hopeless situations. One of the things I have tried to emphasize to every church I have served is that a church’s greatest advertisement and outreach is its members. More people are led to the church, and a renewed life, because of friends and neighbors inviting them to church than through all the ads and mass mailings, and door to door visitation programs ever done. Often I have had a member come back to me and say, “But all my friends already belong to churches,” or “Well, no one new is moving into our area.”

But we never know that the Holy Spirit is doing. It may be that God is giving someone a dream in another land to come and begin something new and we need to be hopefully waiting on the Lord to receive them. It may be that God has planned to use you and your resources in way that you never dreamed possible. So hope in the Lord. Expect God to provide for the help you need. Trust God to guide you. Have confidence that things will get better.

I don’t know what everybody here does for a living. You may sell shoes or manufacture cars or do finances or teach or any number of other things. But like Lydia, a seller of purple, you could become a dealer in hope!