



**Grace Lutheran Church**  
**May 22, 2022: Sixth Sunday of Easter**  
**“Led By the Spirit” (Acts 16)**

At first glance, our text from Acts 16 reads like another good story of how the gospel was spread to the Gentiles, this time through a wealthy woman named Lydia and her great hospitality. In fact, it is anything but ‘just another story.’

Consider the bizarre details. Paul and his group had already traveled 1100 miles on this second missionary journey. Their stated purpose was to visit churches they had already established. Straightforward enough, right? But God mysteriously kept throwing up roadblocks.

First the Holy Spirit forbid them to go to Asia, meaning the central parts of what is now Turkey. Then, when they resolved to go to Bithynia on the north coast of Turkey, the Spirit of Jesus did not permit it. So they resolved to head westward for Troas. But before they started out God had another surprise up God’s sleeve—the vision Paul had of a man who pleads, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” So off they went, *convinced* that God had called them to proclaim the good news there.

Going to Macedonia was no easy task. This was another 400-plus mile journey largely across the Aegean Sea, and sea travel was always treacherous – weather, pirates, who knows what. By this point Paul’s group was exhausted and battered from more than a thousand miles of rough travel. Everywhere they went they eagerly and tirelessly proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ, which made for thousands of converts but also ruthless opposition from the ruling authorities who felt threatened. Paul and his companions were repeatedly rebuked, beaten and imprisoned, and on one occasion Paul was viciously stoned simply out of spite and left for dead.

Yet when Paul received the vision they set out immediately for Macedonia, because they were *convinced* that God had called them to proclaim the good news there.

Why were they convinced? Because they knew it was God calling them. It was always the Holy Spirit – that person of the Trinity who calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies, and proclaims -- both in the impeding and the directing. If they had not been so convinced, and had taken time to reason through this seemingly unreasonable directive – we are worn out, it could be dangerous, and so on – they might have talked themselves out of it. Or, when they arrived in Macedonia, they could have lingered in lovely seaside town of Neapolis, or maybe even put down roots there. It would have been so easy and pleasant. Instead, they made their way straight for Philippi.

The decision to go to Philippi was of huge significance. Had they not gone to Philippi, the history of the church might have turned out very differently or perhaps not at all. Philippi was not only a leading Roman colony but at that time represented the heart of the Roman Empire’s effort to dominate that part of the Mediterranean. Paul’s arrival could have met

with the most brutal opposition yet. But his first encounter was with none other than Lydia, in a quiet place of prayer -- an appointed gathering spot for Jews and others inclined to worship God. Lydia's conversion and the baptism of her entire household led to the establishment of the first house church, by which Christianity grew so rapidly in those early centuries.

Going to Philippi thus issued a resounding 'no' to imperial ways of power and the cult of the emperor as a god, and a resounding 'yes' to a new way of life, a new story, a new promise -- all because Paul was *convinced* that God was leading them.

There are times in our lives when we, too, hear God calling and we must go because we are convinced it is the right thing to do -- even though you might have talked yourself out of it if given half the chance. For John and Bonnie, who are preparing to chart a new course westward, I have some small idea of how disrupting this move has been, how difficult, how demanding, stressful, and how in all your preparations you may have had passing moments as I did when you wondered whether it wouldn't just be so much easier to stay put. To stay with what's familiar instead of venturing into the unknown. Yet I am sure you are convinced that God is calling you to move to be closer to your family, just as it was for Bill and me.

And how do we know that it is God's Spirit at work? Because we are not doing these things on our own. The Holy Spirit always works from within a community. In today's text, we find proof of that at the moment Paul has the vision of the man calling them to come over to Macedonia. Notice that immediately the pronoun changes. The story is no longer told in third person plural but first person plural, no longer "they," but "we." "When Paul had seen the vision, immediately WE sought to go on into Macedonia." (Isn't it great when *grammar* becomes proclamation?)

John and Bonnie, you are not just leaving this church, we are lifting you into the care of those who will receive you, whose lives you will grace just as you have graced ours. And that process of being received has already begun as I know your new community is eagerly anticipating your arrival, just as all of you had begun welcoming Bill and me well before our feet touched Pennsylvania soil. (Tomatoes, tomatoes!) It is all organic, of one piece, guided by the Holy Spirit.

But we can't leave it there. The church, this church, must ask: Where or what or who is our vision, calling us to us to "Come over to Kensington, or Chester, or Norristown, and help us?" I suggest we need a team of people who can help us listen for this, which we might simply call the Vision Team. How is the Holy Spirit calling to us, and once we see that vision or clearly discern that call, will we jump into action like Paul did, or talk ourselves out of it by thinking too much about how hard it is and how tired we are?

"Come over to Macedonia and help us." What is the new life, the new story, the new promise that we are being called to attend to? Our mission statement tells us we are "to glorify God, to grow in faith, to give in service." I think it may be time to add the word "go." Glorify, give, grow, and GO.

Amen.

