

OPENING ACTS

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Acts 16:9-15

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Today, in the book of Acts we find Paul beginning his second missionary journey. The journey takes him to many of the same cities and towns he had visited on his first journey so that he might encourage the newly formed churches. On the first trip, Barnabas had accompanied him, but this time it's Silas and Timothy. As they neared the end of planned stops, they decided to continue on to further parts of Asia Minor, but we are told "the Spirit of Jesus" prevented them. (Acts 16:7) We are not exactly sure what this means, but perhaps there were traveling or weather related issues preventing them from reaching those destinations, or perhaps the Lord laid on Paul's heart an uneasy feeling about those destinations. It's in the midst of these frustrations and the disruption of his initial plans that Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia pleading, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." (Acts 16:9)

Convinced that God wanted him to change his traveling plans, Paul, Silas and Timothy set sail for the region known as Macedonia. When the three of them disembarked from the boat at Philippi and set their feet upon the ground of that Roman colony, the gospel of Jesus Christ officially entered Europe for the first time.

Like typical travelers arriving in an unfamiliar place, Paul and his companions spent time checking out the city and its residents. They discovered there was no synagogue in the city. Since that was the place Paul typically went to get things started, he came up with another plan. He knows that when Jews in an area do not have an actual synagogue, they would establish a place of prayer. Often, that place was located by a river or a body of water. So on the Sabbath day, Paul makes his way to the river in the hopes of finding a group of worshipers. He discovers a group of women gathered for prayer and Paul sits down and begins talking with the women – something that a lot of men would have never done in that day. Among the group was a woman by the name of Lydia. She was not a Jew, but a Gentile who believed in and worshiped God. On that particular day Lydia became the first known European convert to Christianity.

We quickly discover that this new convert, Lydia, is a successful woman who owns a business and a home. She's a "dealer in purple cloth;" the color purple is significant because purple dye was rare and expensive which means the average person could not afford purple cloth. It was only those of wealth, influence, power and royalty who could afford to wear purple. This meant that Lydia had a connection with the rich and famous of her day. She is obviously a financially secure and respected resident of the city of Philippi. There is very little chance that Lydia will ever wind up broke, forgotten, hungry and destitute like so many who lived on the edge of existence in that day. Compared to many, Lydia knows a sense of security and has every reason to want things to stay the same.

And yet, the Lord opens Lydia's heart to listen eagerly to something new, something life changing. Even though there are both personal and business reasons for Lydia to exercise restraint, her heart is moved by Paul's preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. If we had been Lydia's friends that day, how might you and I have counseled her? Would we have encouraged her to open herself to Paul's life-changing message or would we have instead emphasized caution? Would we have reminded her that her life was great just the way it was or would we have encouraged her to "throw caution to the wind"?

There were good reasons for her to not respond to Paul's message. First of all, distrust of strangers would have been a good reason for her to keep her distance. A desire to hold tightly to her possessions would have been a good reason for her to reject Jesus' example of sacrifice. Fear of losing her financial security would have been a good reason for her to run home and protect her assets and connections. Concerns over losing her standing in the community would have been a good reason for her to turn her back on Paul and walk away.

But Lydia is a woman of strength and conviction. She does not allow any of these fear-motivated actions to determine her response. Lydia is motivated by a life-changing faith – a faith that leads her to open herself to acts of generosity and hospitality. Opening her life to Jesus leads her to open her life in additional ways. She and her entire household are baptized, and then she insists, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home..." (vs. 15) Lydia opens her home to Paul, Silas and Timothy, three men who were strangers up until that day. They accepted her invitation and in time, Lydia's house became a center of Christian worship and outreach in Philippi, and Paul develops a close and loving bond with the Philippian congregation.

Later, when he writes his letter to the Philippians, he expresses his gratitude in this way, "You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone" (Phil. 4:15). In those early days, the Philippian Christians were the only generous and hospitable church that cared for Paul and supported Paul's work of preaching the gospel. And it all started with Lydia, a woman whose faith led her to open her life to Christ, her home to Paul, and her spirit to the building up of Christ's church in the city of Philippi.

Centuries ago, Lydia's opening acts had a profound impact on the newborn Church of Jesus Christ in Europe. But even in our day and age, I am convinced that opening acts continue to be the most impactful way for the gospel message to make its way into the heart of individuals and then move to a place of transforming a community. But these opening acts do not come naturally or easily to us. What often happens is that self-interests, fears and different priorities push us back, turn us away from faith's compelling call to openness and action. Instead of faith, we allow considerations of what we might miss or how we might be inconvenienced to determine our decision making. We allow concerns about financial stability, personal security, respect and popularity to have a greater impact on our decision making than faith. Instead of the greatest motivating factor in our life being faith in Jesus Christ, fear of failure, our health, losing friends and so on become the motivating forces behind our decisions and actions.

Fear and self-interest will almost always lead us to hold back, play it safe, oppose change, distrust strangers and close ourselves off to the surprising and challenging good news of God's love and grace. The antidote to this closed-off, held back life is never a tighter grip on our possessions or lifestyles, but a conscious decision to choose Christ and to then allow faith the controlling interest in our lives.

A few years back, Vicki McGaw was the director of Christian education at a church in Cleveland. One day, she was attending a church meeting and struck up a conversation with a woman she did not know well. Vicki learned that the woman's husband, Bob, was in dire need of a kidney transplant. As they talked, both became teary-eyed. And then Vicki asked the woman, "What do I need to do to be tested?" In those moments Vicki had a very clear sense that even though she had never met Bob, she would donate one of her kidneys to him if compatible. Vicki was tested, and

she ended up being more of a perfect match than any of Bob's family members. The surgery took five hours, and was a complete success. Vicki returned home in two days, and resumed her job the next week.

Bob also recovered well, and he is enormously grateful to Vicki. His family calls her a "miracle from God." The entire experience had a great impact on the congregation, and as the pastor of the church observed, "I've witnessed something unexpected. People are asking, where is God in their lives, and what is God leading them to do? They know that it was no coincidence that Vicki was a match for Bob..."

Like Lydia, Vicki chose faith over fear. She practiced extraordinary generosity instead of ordinary self-concern. Vicki said, "A person can find 20 million reasons not to do something, but there is usually one reason that sticks with you as to why you should." That one reason is typically the one that has everything to do with faith. So, how is Christ at work in your life? What opening act is Christ compelling you to enact right now, right here?

When faith is the motivating force in our lives, self-interests and fear take a back seat as the Spirit of Christ leads us to engage in opening acts of generosity and hospitality. This motivating force of faith compels us to do things such as open our wallets when asked to support an international or local mission – open our homes to an international student or a foster child or a small group Bible study – open our car doors to programs that deliver meals to the elderly – open our hands to pack food or renovate homes for the poor – open our schedules so that we have time to participate in the work of Christ happening through our church's Team ministries – open our hearts to share God's love in more ways than my message has time to list.

By following the examples of Lydia and Vicki, along with countless other people of faith, we can move from a life ruled by anxiety, fear and false priorities to a life shaped by faith. Of course, the particular path we each follow will be different, but whatever the path it will, not may, but WILL involve opening acts. It might mean opening your heart and home, as Lydia did. It might mean opening your God-given body, as Vicki did. If you are a person of faith, God is calling you to open something, so whatever you open the point is to be motivated and led by faith in a Savior who opened himself fully to us. The point is to BE a person of faith, to BE a church of faith, and to therefore DO what God has put us here to do. May God be glorified by your opening acts of faith! May God be glorified by our opening acts of faith! Amen.