

Lydia

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First, my thanks to Jay for the time it must have taken to master the pronunciations on all those cities. By my count, you went 11 for 11.

This passage from the book of Acts describes one of Paul's journeys, in the years just after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul is traveling the world he knows proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ wherever he can go, and beginning new churches in people's homes along the way.

Paul's journey is guided by the Spirit of God, who both shuts off certain paths, and invites Paul down others. We hear this mysterious statement that he was "prevented by the Spirit from going to both Asia and Bithynia" but Paul had a dream in which a Macedonian man begs Paul to come and see them.

So, this leg of Paul's journey sees him traveling up through present day Turkey, sailing cross a small stretch of the Aegean Sea, with a

quick stop on the tiny Island of Samothrace and heading into the land of Macedonia, modern day Greece.

Somewhere along the Macedonian coast, outside the gates of the city, there was a riverbank. Which Paul and his companions have heard is a place of prayer. The text is a little vague on exactly what this means, but it seems like it is an outdoor place where Jews in the region gathered on the sabbath. It is not clear why they met outdoors, and it would have been a bit peculiar, but nevertheless, on the sabbath Paul goes to meet them, thinking that they might be receptive to his message.

He heads down to this place of prayer by the river and begins to talk about Jesus to anyone who will listen.

And it is there that he meets a woman named Lydia.

Now these couple of verses, and one more that I will mention later, comprise everything we know about Lydia, but even with just a few

details, we can fill in a lot of her story with a little informed imagination.

Here is what the Book of Acts tells us.

“One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.

When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us.”

So that is what we know.

She was from Thyatira.

She was a merchant selling purple cloth.

She was open to Paul's message and was baptized along with everyone in her house.

And she was hospitable. The kind of hostess that you can't say no to. You end up staying longer than you planned to, eating more than you wanted to, but you are glad that you did.

What can we piece together from those details?

First is that Lydia was a foreigner. She was from Thyatira, which is back over in modern day Turkey, a city Paul had probably passed through close to the beginning of his journey.

And she is presented in the text as a single woman, although it does not say so explicitly, the fact that she is referred to as having "a household" and that she has her own career, both point to the most likely fact that she is either widowed, or unmarried. Most scholars argue that the most likely explanation for her position in that world as

an unmarried woman, working as a merchant, so far from where she was born, is that she is a freed slave.

She has what we might think of as a pretty solid middle-class job. Its not going to make her rich, but its steady business.

And she is running a house that is large enough to host a few weary travelers.

Imagine that day with me:

She left that home one sabbath morning to head down to the river to pray. It was the only time during the week when she didn't feel like an outsider. A chance to be in a place with people who spoke and prayed the way she did. A reminder of the homeland she remembered from her childhood.

She was tired. Ready for the day of rest her faith commanded, but still struggling to clear her mind and heart of the orders she would

have waiting for her when the sun rose on the next day. Kicking herself for those last 2 things she didn't get done before it set last night.

When she arrived at that familiar place of prayer, there was an unfamiliar face. She probably rolled her eyes at first, some guy up there who is sure he's got the answer I need. Talking away.

Nevertheless, she sat, and listened. And as she did his words awakened something in her, touched deeper place, and stirred.

He talked about a man named Jesus, who preached peace, and who rose from the worst death the world could have dealt him. Who offered her eternal life and heaven on earth, not as a reward for her obedience, but as a gift from his love.

And so she walked up to him after he had finished, and he plunged her into waters of that river baptizing her. Lydia. The first Christian convert on the European Continent. The love and vision of God taking

hold in yet another corner of creation, and in yet another human heart.

“You must come stay with me tonight” she told Paul and his friends.

“That’s so kind, but we really must be on our way...”

“I won’t take no for an answer.”

And so, she persuaded them.

I mentioned that there was one other instance where Lydia appears.

It comes at the end of Acts chapter 16, Paul and his companions have been arrested and imprisoned because their teachings and conversations have, in the words of their accusers, “put the city in an uproar.” They were causing trouble.

Paul was only in jail a few days before he converted the guard, and earned himself a speedy release. And the moment he got out of

prison, he goes to Lydia's house. He goes there, scripture says, to talk to all the brothers and sisters before he left town.

So this is the last thing we learn about Lydia, that mere days after her baptism, and without much guidance or instruction from anyone, her home had become the gathering place for the emerging Christian community in Macedonia.

Because of course there were no churches yet, not one solid structure dedicated to this new faith.

The church grew in the houses of faithful women and men throughout the world who opened their homes to be gathering places, and in some cases, hideouts, for the world's first Christians.

And I think this is why the author of Acts told Lydia's story. Because she shows us that the gospel message does not leave us well enough alone.

The sort of faith that Christ invites us to is not something that we can simply add on to our life as it is. It is not merely another activity.

It changes us. It reorders our priorities. It sends us back into our lives in a new way.

Lydia was an immigrant woman, supporting herself so far from home that she would almost certainly never return. She had done ok, but she wasn't rich.

And when the spirit of God stirred in her heart, her near immediate impulse was to ask what she could do in service of this new movement.

She was in fact such an eager volunteer, that at first Paul said no. I think he was just a little surprised. But she persisted.

And because of her, as much as Paul, a few weeks later Macedonia had a church, in her home.

For that, she was remembered in this earliest account of church history, the Book of Acts.

Lydia is a model of two important things about the life of faith.

First, she is a reminder that God is at work in everyone.

Women were essential partners with Paul in founding the first churches in the world. Not just Lydia but, Priscilla, Mary, Persis, Julia, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Phoebe, Junia, Chloe, Euodia, and Syntyche are all named as close partners of Paul's in founding churches throughout the Mediterranean.

And she was an immigrant, and very possibly a freed slave. The kind of person that the powerful people in her world would scarcely notice let alone regard as a potential leader.

She is a reminder that God is at work in everyone.

And second, faith for her becomes immediately active. Once her heart is transformed her life quickly follows.

Once she experiences what faith has done for her, she has to find out what she can do for the faith.

As many of you know, Molli and I welcomed our second child two weeks ago, and we named her Lydia.

Its a funny thing, picking a name for someone you've only just met. Its one of the first things we get to do for someone as a parent.

There are lots of ways to approach it, but I think about it as a way of offering a blessing and a charge. Sending these new ones into the world, christened with a first bit of parental direction and encouragement.

Our oldest is Cora, which shares a root with the word courage.

Something we pray for her each day as she grows into this world.

And now Lydia. I would say to her, and I say to each of you:

Don't ever overlook people because of who they are, and don't ever allow yourself to be overlooked because of who you are.

And, when something takes a hold of your heart, when you come to believe something with all your might, don't let it just be a subject for your own contemplation. Don't let it die as a pile of unfulfilled words.

Get to work. And bring it to life.

