
⁶ Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. ¹¹ From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. ¹² From there we travelled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days. ¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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. Acts 16:6-15

Some time ago I watched a fascinating movie called 'Another Earth'. This is not a movie most people would like watching, as it has science-fiction themes, and the premise of the movie may seem a little absurd. But what the movie is about is that 'another Earth' just like ours is discovered on the opposite side of the sun. And the setting is that everything that happens on Earth1 is exactly replicated on Earth2 – that is, until the day of mutual discovery (or 'awareness'). From that day of 'discovery', things diverge on different 'paths'.

This movie revolves around Rhoda, a brilliant 17-year-old girl who has spent her young life fascinated by astronomy. She is delighted to learn that she has been accepted into MIT, and celebrates, drinking with friends. She then drives home heavily intoxicated, and she is listening to her radio at the moment the 'other earth' discovery is announced, and carelessly looking out the side window. At that moment she inadvertently hits a stopped car at an intersection, putting the male occupant in a coma and killing his pregnant wife and young son. She is sent to prison, and after four years is released, struggling with regret. This movie reflects on Rhoda reflects on this traumatic experience, and also explores issues of 'self-identity' and 'self-awareness'.

As part of this movie there are two pieces of interesting script ('voiceover') by Rhoda. The first is this: *Within our lifetimes, we've marvelled as biologists have managed to look at ever smaller and smaller things. And astronomers have looked further and further into the dark night sky, back in time and out in space. But maybe the most mysterious of all is neither the small nor the large: it's us, up close. Could we even recognise ourselves, and if we did, would we know ourselves? What would we say to ourselves? What would we learn from ourselves?*

There is also this fascinating bit of dialogue: *"It would be very hard to think 'I am over there' and 'Can I go meet me?' and 'Is that me better than this me?' 'Can I learn from the other me?' 'Has the other me made the same mistakes I've made?' Or, 'Can I sit down and have a conversation with me?' Wouldn't that be an interesting thing? The truth is, we do that all day long every day. People don't admit it and they don't think about it too much, but they do. Every day, they're talking in their own head. 'What's he doing?' 'Why'd he do that?' 'What did she think?' 'Did I say the right thing?'"*

How often are we like this, talking to ourselves in our head?

Sometimes, however, people say the 'voices' they hear are 'the voice' or 'Spirit' of God. You may have heard someone say "God told me..." "God said I should take this job... choose this school... leave this congregation... and so on..."

What we may often find fascinating are those people who claim 'God told me to do this', whilst someone close to them says "God told me to do the opposite". Also fascinating are those who one year say "God told me to do this", but the following year are saying "God told me" to do something completely different. Do we sometimes say 'God told me' to obviate ourselves of personal responsibility? (ie: "I'm really not sure, but if I say 'God told me', maybe I can convince myself, or convince others"). I also know those who have said 'God told me' because they did not want to enter into a discussion about certain choices they have made. (ie: "'God told me', so who are you to question what I am going to do...?").

Of course, within our hearts we are to be seeking 'the voice of God'. And often we cannot 'hear God' because we have become so 'distracted' (and we feel 'overwhelmed') by 'everyday life' that we cannot 'hear the voice of God'. And sometimes, quite honestly, we simply don't want to be cause we know we might have to change the way we are living, or confront some 'demon' of the past' or some 'sin' of the present. So, how do we 'hear' the voice of God?

In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles we gain a valuable 'insight' into 'hearing the voice of God'. In a fascinating encounter in Paul's journey to bring the Good News of Jesus into Europe, Luke (the writer of the Acts of the Apostles) states (Acts 16:6): *"Paul and his companions were kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia... and we were prevented by the Spirit of Jesus to enter Bithynia."* Paul had a vision and... *"after Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them"*.

I've always wondered 'how' the Spirit 'prevented Paul' from journeying into 'Asia' (now known as 'Turkey'). There are all sorts of theories here (from Paul having to confront day-to-day obstacles that made he and his companions reflect on their mission), to some 'auditory experience' where they 'heard the voice of God'. We aren't told 'how' God 'spoke to them'. But what we do know is the He did. And we know the Holy Spirit led them into Macedonia and opened the heart of Lydia to the Good News of Jesus.

In the account recorded in our text for today, Paul ended up at a place that he originally wasn't planning to be. Paul and his companions, Silas and Timothy, are traveling in what is now Turkey. Their intention, according to Acts (15:36, 16:1), is to go to the churches which Paul had planted in a previous journey, check on them, strengthen them, and share with them the decision of the Jerusalem council. Paul revisits the churches in Derbe and Lystra which he had planted (16:1), but then God redirects his plans.

We also often have our plans of what we think should happen to us. We have our designs on where we should go and where we should live. But what do we do when God takes us along another pathway upon which we had not planned to travel? At times we may become resentful and bitter. We think: "How could this have happened? How could my hopes be so shattered?" We may become angry with and resentful of God. We resent that He hasn't given us our heart's desire.

But the good news is that God's will, as Luther affirms, is "good and gracious" (Explanation to the Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer). There is this saying: "Man proposes, but God disposes." God disposes His will upon us even when it conflicts with our will. And God disposes upon us His goodness. God disposes upon us His grace! And that grace comes to us, first, because of the One who in the garden prayed, "Thy will, O God, not Mine, be done." That grace comes to us because of the Servant of the Lord who submitted to the will of the Lord to crush Him. He went to the place where we should go—to hell itself. Talk about an unpreferred assignment! But there Christ also declared his victory over sin, a victory which he now shares with us in this Eastertide and forevermore!

What then may we learn from our text? First, God's Plan is always accomplished. No matter how things look or seem or feel to us, God's Plan is accomplished in the world without fail. Paul writes *that "the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things...[is] according to the eternal purpose [plan] that he has realised in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Ephesians 3:9b, 11). It was God's Plan that Paul go to Macedonia to preach the Gospel that Lydia and her family would believe. God prevented Paul from going where Paul thought he should go, and God brought him to where He wanted him at that time.

Second, God may be moving us to something better in preventing us from accomplishing what we want to do. We know that God has promised, "*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose*" (Romans 8:28). That is the long-term promise – in the end, all things will work for the good of those who love God.

Third, no matter what happens or how things look to us, God is still trustworthy. Why? Because He is Sovereign, and He loves us. Paul writes, "*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?*" (Romans 8:31-32).

Here is an interesting question to consider: What would you attempt to do if you knew you could not fail? Where *is* God calling you in life?

Here is another important question: how is the Spirit of God at work *within* your life? For some, they look to some sort of great ‘signs and wonders’. But in his letter to the Church at Rome the Apostle Paul says (Romans 8:15-16) “*The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by Him [the Spirit] we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.*” The Holy Spirit speaks within us saying, “You belong to God: Jesus is your Lord God and Saviour.”

And it is in this context that the Holy Spirit also ‘directs’ us in ‘everyday life’ through the very word of God. The Holy Spirit does not tell you what colour clothes to wear, what some of home you should buy, or what sort of food you should eat. However, the Holy Spirit gives us parameters for behaviour. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20): “*Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.*” God has given us a ‘plan’ and a ‘purpose’ for life, and an excellent reference point for this (in ‘everyday living’) are His Ten Commandments. And God *has* given us His word, the Bible, which speaks of His ‘ultimate plan’ – the plan for our salvation in Jesus.

The Holy Spirit also gives us ‘power’ for ‘living’ (note 1 Timothy 1:7: “*For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline*”). This ‘power’, of course, the ‘power’ of being an ‘important person’; rather, it is the ‘inner strength’ of knowing God’s love that directs and sustains us in life. The Holy Spirit enables us to ‘move forward’ in life with confidence (just as Paul and Luke were able to confidently enter Europe) because we know sins are forgiven, and we have life with God forever through Jesus.

What ‘voice’ do you ‘listen to’ as you journey through life? In our reading this day Lydia ‘listened’, and the Lord opened her heart to believe (v.14). Lydia’s faith becomes immediately active as she hears the word and believes. She is baptised along with her whole household, and she opened her home.

To be led by the Spirit is to begin with prayer; it’s to see God at work in all of life – the good and the bad – and finally, it’s to surrender your will to God’s good and perfect will for your life. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul said, “*I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I that live, but Christ living in me. That life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself up for me.*” (Galatians 2:20). And understand this: this is not an obituary, but a birth announcement.

Because of Jesus’ death (and hence the forgiveness He has won for us), and because of Jesus’ resurrection (and new life that awaits us forever), we can deal with each day with ‘peace’, and the ‘future’ with confidence’. Paul’s life began when he gave up trying to do things his way, and instead committed his life to the Lord Jesus. May our minds and hearts also be open to being led by the Spirit, and listening to the voice of Jesus in His word, and rejoicing in His love. Amen.