



The God of the Unexpected



A Sermon By
The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell

May 26, 2019
The Sixth Sunday of Easter
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at:
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019-05-26-AAC.mp3>.

The God of the Unexpected

The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell
Grace Episcopal Church
The Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 26, 2019

Acts 16:9-15

Psalm 67

John 14:23-29

One of the things I love about the Easter season, is that week after week, we hear stories from the book of Acts. Acts, or as it's full title - Acts of the Apostles - indicates, is a book full of the thrilling actions of the early Christian community. Jesus had already died, risen, ascended to heaven, and gifted his followers with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, or the Advocate, that Jesus mentions in our gospel text today, fills Jesus' disciples with power, grace, and courage to live together in unity and to share the Good News of Jesus with others.

And boy do they! Acts recounts the exhilarating adventures of Jesus' first followers as they go out, filled with the Spirit, and tell people about the new life they have found in Christ. In story after story, people are moved by the disciples' witness and they begin to follow Jesus too. Jesus' disciples seem unstoppable! Making their way through the ancient world, they win heart after heart for Jesus.

The narrative is exciting, it's moving, compelling and borders on the mythical. But at times, it can almost feel too good to be true. Every door opens and every path is cleared. Acts presents an idealized retelling of early Christianity, which at times can feel almost perfect.

But today's reading from Acts 16 reminds us that this period in Christian history wasn't perfect after all. This time period was filled with frustration, road blocks, confusion, and surprises, even for one of the most famous of Jesus' followers, Paul of Tarsus. Today's text reminds us that sometimes, things don't go as planned. Sometimes, what we want doesn't come to pass. We read the signs incorrectly. Things turn out differently than we expect, yet God always works with us and in us to bring about life.

In the verses preceding our text today, which unfortunately, are not part of our assigned reading, Paul and his companions Silas and Timothy seem to be at a loss for where they should next travel with the gospel. They stumble around the region, running into one barrier after another. They run into roadblocks left and right. They can't go south and west into Asia, nor can they go north into Bythinia. Paul appears backed into a coastal corner at Troas, by what surely must feel to him like a strange and repeated "no" from God. Then, Paul receives a vision in the night.

In his vision, an unidentified Macedonian man pleads for him to "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Paul heeds the vision as a genuine call from God, and travels to Philippi, a major city in the Roman colony of Macedonia. Though Paul and his companions apparently waste no time in getting to the city, the mission still requires patience. Not much happens for a while. The text tells us that they were there for "some days." The appeal in the vision is urgent, and the response to it is immediate; but the results are not seen right away. And then, when God does begin to work in Philippi, it comes with a surprise. Paul's vision involved a Macedonian man. But the first to welcome the gospel in Philippi was not a man, but a woman.

The text tells us that after being in Philippi for several days and not having a clear understanding of what to do next, the sabbath day rolls around. Paul and his companions, as was their custom, look for a place of prayer, that they might worship and take the opportunity to teach about Jesus. So, they go to where they assume they will find a place of prayer, outside the city gate by the river. It is by the riverside that Paul and company encounter Lydia and a group of women. They anticipate that they will find a place of prayer here and indeed they do, though it is occupied by people they did not expect to minister with.

Lydia is described as a worshipper of God. She and the women who had assembled with her listen to Paul and his companions. The text describes the scene like this, “The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.” Lydia and her household are then baptized and she offers Paul a place to stay. An open heart results in open doors. She extends hospitality to Paul and his companions and they accept. Although they meet in Philippi, Lydia is from Thyatira. Since she is living in Philippi, it seems that Lydia is away from a place she once called home, a place with which she is still affiliated. Perhaps this made her particularly attuned to the needs of the group of travelers declaring the word of the Lord. Lydia is described by the work that she does; she is a dealer in purple cloth. As a business woman, she is both able and willing to support the ministry of Jesus Christ by providing shelter to ministers. She welcomes strangers in a place where she once was a stranger.

It is important to note that this hospitality and generosity is found in an expected place, coming from those who we do not anticipate to extend it. Paul sets sail looking for a man to share the good news with in Macedonia. Instead, he encounters a group of women who receive the good news with joy. It may have been a wonder to Paul that he was even in Macedonia to begin with. It was not where he wanted to be. He had plans to travel elsewhere. He had other ideas for spreading the Gospel. But those ideas did not come to pass at that time. God called Paul to an unexpected place to minister to unexpected people and to receive unexpected hospitality and generosity in return.

God is full of surprises, then and now. Sometimes, like Paul, we may envision our lives in a certain way, we think we should go in a certain direction, but then, for whatever reason, that plan doesn't pan out. Or maybe, like Paul with his dream, we may feel like we have a vision and clarity, but it turns out we misinterpret the signs.

Hear this, no matter what road blocks, frustration, or confusion we grapple with, what God did with Paul, God will do with us. God will see us through in unexpected ways to surprising ends. Aspects of our lives may turn out differently than we expected, yet God always works with us and in us to bring about life, even when we can't perceive it.

Jesus told his followers, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” Take courage, listen, like Lydia, be open hearted. Like Paul, be willing to risk your plans for God's plans. God is with you and will work in unexpected ways in your life to further the Kingdom of God here on earth. Our lives are a continuation of the Acts of the Apostles. May we who follow Jesus, be open to the unexpected surprises God has in store for us and for the world. Amen.