

The Adventures of Acts
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
5-21-2017
Acts 16:9-16

I like to think of myself as an explorer. That's right. I am pretty adventurous and downright curious. I am always on a quest. But I don't want you to get the wrong idea. I am not Indiana Jones – I have no desire to find the lost ark or the Holy Grail, and I dislike snakes even more than he does. And I'm no good at complex puzzles, so I'm not like Ben Gates searching for his National Treasure. And I'm not nearly as tough and athletic as Lara Croft, so you won't find me raiding tombs any time soon. No, no I am on a different kind of quest altogether – I am always in search of the next great place to eat. I'll admit it. I'm a foodie, and I love greasy spoons, and dives, and dumps – the darker the lights, the dirtier the floor, and the tackier the sign, the better.

And there are three great things about the adventure of searching for a memorable dive: 1) there's the finding 2) the telling and 3) the sharing.

It's the best to find a dive all on your own. When I was first out of college, I moved to Atlanta, and lived with several friends. None of us were natives, but all of us loved good BBQ and cold beverages. Over that first year in Atlanta, each of us followed our taste buds or the Holy Spirit or just plain ole inclination to points all over the city. And because we had more courage than brains in this endeavor, our favorite dives were always obscure and always dangerous-looking. And there was nothing more satisfying than to find a spot, and to proclaim, "Oh yeah, the fellas are gonna love this place! We are gonna be regulars!"

But the telling was more fun than the finding. It's not an adventure if you can't brag about it.

"Have you been to Harold's BBQ – it's right across the street from the federal prison!"

Another would say, "How about Lenny's? It didn't look real safe, but they had a great hamburger, and man those locals sure do sing good karaoke!!!"

Still another, "If you haven't had a fried pork chop at the Majestic at 4AM, you haven't lived! But you do NOT wanna have it at noon."

And then there's the sharing. Half the fun of an adventure is sharing it with others. The more we went to our favorite dives, the better the experience. We'd teach each other the tricks to getting the best out of our meal. We learned not to order a side-item with our ribs at Phat Matt's Rib Shack, lest you get the small half of the rack. We learned the hard way that the jalapenos at Case Grande were a lot hotter than we thought. We learned that ice cream almost always makes your dessert better, especially on a Varsity Peach Pie. We learned that you can always get a table at Miss Mary Mac's Tearoom for breakfast on Saturday mornings at 9:55 AM. But if you get there at 10:01AM, you might as well wait for lunch. And we learned that a

hamburger named the Coronary Attack at a place called the Vortex, delicious though it may be, will absolutely ruin one's productivity.

For my group of friends, discovering the hidden eateries of Atlanta was our own little adventure. Sometimes we found the adventure for ourselves. Sometimes others found the adventure for us. But regardless of who found the adventure, we always enjoyed sharing it together – We enjoyed finding places (and we still do, I might add) that brought out the very best of our friendships – Places that allowed us to laugh and love and live in community with one another, and share really good fries.

I like to think of the book of Acts as the first great adventure of the Christian Church. The life and teachings of Jesus change everything! God has come and dwelled among us, and now, through the Holy Spirit, God still does. Jesus has charged the disciples, and Paul, and all the others in this fledgling church to go and spread the news. "Follow my lead," Christ says. And off they go. And along the way the members of this new church will experience the adventure of finding, telling, and sharing the Gospel message.

In this morning's text, we meet up with the Apostle Paul. After departing from the Jerusalem Council, Paul and Silas, leave on a long journey through Asia Minor and on into Europe. Paul intends to visit all of the churches he's ministered to in his previous travels. He'll retrace his steps. It's gonna be a grand reunion tour; a great new adventure. But the Holy Spirit has other plans. The Holy Spirit is Paul's new GPS, and it will take Paul to places he's never been.

If I were Paul, I'd be half-excited by and half-frustrated with the Holy Spirit. Some days I might say, "Are we there yet!?!". Other days, "Ugh, are we there yet?" Or perhaps I'd have a little doubt: "Where in the world are you taking me!?!". But not Paul – Paul and Silas are resilient, and they follow the Spirit.

A few hundred miles into their journey, the Holy Spirit sends a clear message: You are forbidden from travelling into Asia. You are going even further away from Jerusalem than your first journey!!!

Asia Minor was the western-most Roman province in Asia, which is now modern-day Turkey. Paul and Silas obey the Holy Spirit and proceed through the central Roman provinces of Galatia and Phrygia, avoiding Asia, and eventually making it to a port called Troas on the Aegean Sea.

While at Troas, Paul sees a vision at night, and we're told that a Man from Macedonia beckons him across the sea. Paul and Silas and the others do not delay. They set sail for Philippi, which is in modern day Greece.

The author of Luke calls Philippi a "leading city of Macedonia." The city became a hotspot for veterans of the Roman army. But Philippi seems a strange place for Paul to spend much time. There is no synagogue inside the city gates, and pious Jews are scarce in these parts. This

doesn't sound like fertile ground to build a church on. But Paul is letting the spirit lead him, and so he stays on in Philippi for several days.

And now we get to the good part of the text. You see it's in the most unlikely of places that great adventures begin. We all know that good fishin' holes and barbeque joints and breathtaking views are always found off the beaten path – they are never on the road most taken. It's the same way with the adventure of finding the sacred – the sacred is found in the most unexpected of places – God dwells in the ordinary.

The text tells us that on the Sabbath, Paul and the others decide to go and find the sacred in Philippi. They walk out of the city gates, and along the river – They're looking for a good place to worship.

And along the banks of the river, in a very ordinary place they find an extraordinary moment of sacredness – a place to find and tell and share the gospel.

It is here that Paul meets a group of Gentile women worshipping by the water. Paul and his companions tell these women of their experiences with the risen Christ. They describe their travels, how God leads them, and they invite them to join their community of believers.

Among these women is Lydia. Lydia is a successful business woman – She's a dealer of purple-dyed cloth – She's a kind of ancient-day Coco Chanel with an exclusive clientele. Purple was reserved for royalty, and it was expensive to make – It was gathered from mollusks, and it took about 1,000 mollusks to generate one ounce of dye! Lydia's ability to obtain and trade this cloth makes her a really big deal – prosperous and prestigious. But despite her wealth, Lydia is in search of something more than material things. She's come to the river for a different kind of treasure. We're told that the Lord opens Lydia's heart to listen eagerly to Paul's words, and in so doing, she becomes a believer. She and her whole household are baptized. Lydia is the first recorded convert in all of Europe.

God had led Paul on an adventure to the sacred – Paul finds a group of eager listeners. He tells them of the joy he knows in Christ, and then he shares that joy with them through baptism. But the adventure is only half over. At the moment of Lydia's conversion, something even more extraordinary happens:

The text tells us that Lydia asks Paul and his friends to come and stay in her home. For so many years, Paul has been the person who finds the adventure of the sacred and shares it with others. But now, Lydia is turning that around. Lydia invites Paul to come and be fed by the spirit in her home – Paul is transformed from host into guest, and Lydia from guest into host.

The church at Philippi will become the most-treasured and tender for Paul, because it is here that Christian ministry becomes reciprocal. Paul ministers to the Philippians, and he is ministered to by them. The church at Philippi becomes the best kind of adventure – a shared one.

It's in Philippi, that the Christian Church finally gets it. Jesus had emphasized the importance of table fellowship at the Last Supper. He reminded the disciples to love and to be loved, to serve and to be served...to have the humility to not only preach the gospel, but to let it also preach back. In Lydia, Paul does not find a student or a disciple, he finds a co-worker, a peer, a friend who challenges him to not only give with an open heart, but to also receive with an open heart.

The Christian adventure begins with individual faith – a spark that connects our hearts to the risen Christ. But the Christian adventure is cultivated amongst community. It is in the sharing of our lives with others that we experience the full and resplendent joy of a God who loves us.

Paul and Lydia each opened themselves to hearing God's call in their lives. The Spirit brought them to a riverbank. And they found the adventure of the sacred.

And in much the same way as my friends and I suggested ways to find Atlanta's best hamburger, I can picture Paul and Lydia sitting around the table of some BBQ joint on Wilkinson Boulevard. I hear them saying, "Do you wanna find the sacred? There's a place outside the city gates. It doesn't look like much, but if you'll open your heart, and listen with eager ears, you'll find it – you'll find a community of love that will change your life forever. And when you find it, be sure to tell the others."

I'm pretty sure Paul and Lydia were looking in on me this past week. I met the sacred in our picnic shelter: first last Saturday as enthusiastic Sardisians took turns singing karaoke, and again on Wednesday night as we enjoyed a cool breeze and even cooler ice cream. And again a few Thursdays ago – I popped into the Labyrinth, where the rain had introduced new colors. And once more two Wednesday nights ago when boys and girls sucked their straws frantically to transfer M&Ms from one plate to another, and men and women searched for the face of Jesus in a Cheeto – all to win a coveted-dollar-store-prize. And we showed each other how to laugh. And again this morning, as we passed the peace of Christ. Yeah, I'm pretty sure Paul and Lydia were there.

Each and every day, God is leading us on an adventure to find the sacred. You may find it and show others. Others may find it and show you. Either way, embrace that moment with an open heart, because this is where God dwells. And when you do, be sure you tell Miss Lydia – I know she'll want to hear all about it. Amen.