

By Chance Acts 16:6-15

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tthJlMRGPSw> (show the first 3.15 min)



Coincidence.

Serendipity.

Synchronicity.

Fate.

Chance.

God.

Spirit.

We have lots of names

for this thing we call happenstance,
don't we?

I mean what are the odds
that a part-time Uber driver,
picks up a particular Notre Dame student
who will change his daughter's life?

Many of us have stories that are like this
...Stories where for unexplainable reasons,
we happen upon someone
or something that changes our lives
for the better.

Some of you are thinking of a story right now.
That time you met *that* person at the airport...
The night you stopped
at *that* gas station on your way home.
That story of when you
happened to be in the right place
at the right time.

And to think happenstance
is what we read this morning.
To think we might never have even heard of Lydia!

These few short verses in Acts
don't tell us a lot at first glance,
but they continue the framework
of a much larger story
—and Lydia now stands
as an exemplar in the faith.

But in order to meet Lydia,
we first need to find Paul, Silas and Timothy.



They've been traveling through
the region of the Mediterranean and Asia Minor,
checking in on the growing faith communities
of Jews and Gentiles
in various towns as they go.
Earlier in this chapter we learn,
“As they went from town to town,
they delivered to [the believers]
for observance
the decisions that had been reached
by the apostles and elders
who were in Jerusalem.
So the churches were strengthened in the faith
and increased in numbers daily.” (Acts 16:4-5)

Paul and his brothers in the faith
were riding high.
Things were good.
The Spirit was obviously with them:
the covered dish
to attract new members
was well attended.

The church was full on Sunday
because no one had soccer practice
or a swim meet
or a baseball game
or college football tailgates to drive home from.

The youth group in Derbe
was eager to paint the walls of the church
and the landscaping committee in Lystra
had planted new olive trees beside the lavender,
and primrose looked great in the parking lot.

With all this good news
of growing, thriving churches,
our missionaries sat down
took out their phones,
and cued up Google Maps
so they can plot a course for Asia.
That's where we'll go next, they decide,
feels like the right next move, they agree.
And then peculiar thing happens.

Acts doesn't tell us *why*,
but Paul, Silas and Timothy
don't have the same success in Asia.
Luke, simply writes,
"They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia
having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit
to speak the word in Asia."

Isn't that interesting?
Has the Holy Spirit ever forbidden you
from doing something you felt you should do?
I mean it is more likely
that you didn't get that job you wanted,
than you felt forbidden by the Spirit.
Maybe you were trying to buy a house,
and the sellers didn't accept your offer.

But listen to Paul's words in 2 Corinthians,

“We do not want you to be unaware,
brothers and sisters,
of the affliction we experienced in Asia;
for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed
that we despaired of life itself.”

That must be what it felt like
to be forbidden by the Holy Spirit
to speak the word in Asia.

And so by chance, by fate, by the power of the Holy Spirit,
Paul's group is sent another direction.

They are opposite of Mysia
and Paul and Silas and Timothy
think of heading north toward Bithynia.

But again, they are stymied.

“When they had come opposite of Mysia,
they attempted to go into Bithynia
but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.” (Acts 16:7)

Another road block?

What do they mean the road is closed,
young Timothy must have asked the other two.

This is surely when Silas started questioning

Paul's “intuition,”
his ability to hear what the Spirit is telling them
about where the gospel
should go next.

Feeling a little lost
they stop at Starbucks
and try to regroup
and eventually decide to go around Mysia.



Maybe they scoured map apps
and tried to think of ways
to go see other start-up churches.
I'm sure they fervently prayed
for guidance and direction.

They had been riding the heels of good reports
and increasing numbers for days
and so to have been thwarted in their efforts,
now twice, by the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Jesus;
well their resolve was definitely slowed down.

Twice!
Silas kept saying while shaking his head.

Can you imagine the sense of confusion?
Or maybe they were indignant and felt jaded.
We do know they were persistent.
Because they reroute and head toward Troas.

That's when a breakthrough happens!
While bunking together
in an economy room at the La Quinta,
Paul has a vision!
Now visions are surprising things.
Paul had already had one on the road to Damascus.
Peter had one while fasting and praying in Joppa.
When we talk today
about God's vision for the church,
we often mean strategic planning,
as one step in a congregation's planning process.

We pray,
we thank God for working in our midst
and then we discern

that God is calling us to hire a consultant.
This makes a vision manageable,
right?¹

“Come over to Macedonia and help us,”
a man of Macedonia pleads.
Paul’s vision is so real and so vivid—so clear.
It has nothing to do with consulting, does it?
And is it at all manageable
to be compelled to go to a place you’ve never been?
It just so happens
that Troas is the perfect place to be
if you want to get to Macedonia.

They book some seats on a river boat cruise.
They dock for the night in Samothrace
and write letters to their churches
reminding them to pray always
and report that the Samothrace lobster bisque is exquisite.

The next morning
they are in Neapolis and Uber to Philippi.

They can feel this is the right direction;
deep down, like in their bones.
No longer are they getting out their phones
to see where to go
—they can tell the Spirit is guiding them.

In fact, by this point of the story,
it is not Paul, Silas or Timothy
that we ought to be paying attention to
...but rather the Spirit
and how that Spirit is intentionally driving this mission.

This isn’t just Paul’s Second Missionary Journey,
this is the Spirit pushing and prodding
and opening the way and closing others,

¹ David G. Forney, Acts 16:9-15 Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2 (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2009 pg.474)

in order for the gospel to be let loose.

Paul, Silas and Timothy

stay in Philippi for a few days.

This is definitely new territory;

they certainly were be led by the Spirit
but they are also far, far from their comfort zone.

The plea of Macedonia

means the gospel is spreading farther
than any of them would have ever suspected.²

This was never something

they never could have managed
of their own accord.

No one is sure what Paul and Silas and Timothy did
for the days they stayed in Philippi

—but my hunch is they prayed,

fasted, and had their eyes peeled
for the spirit to guide them

to the pleading man of Paul's vision.

Now that it is the Sabbath,

Paul suggests they go down past the city gates

—which is odd because usually

they just visited the synagogues in town.

They go down toward the river

where they have heard

there is a place of prayer.

Paul follows the weekly tradition of Sabbath prayer

and that where he meets, Lydia.³



Lydia, a woman who is a believer.

² Richard M. Landers, Acts 16:9-15 Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2 (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2009 pg.477)

³ Ibid, (pg.477)

A woman of means and wealth.
A woman who has gathered
with other women to worship and pray.
“She came to the riverside,
to a secluded place of prayer
...perhaps she came regularly.
What she did not know
was that on this particular day
outside the city gates,
she would meet Paul and his companions,
missionaries looking for anyone
who was seeking God
in this hidden place of prayer.
There at the riverside,
Lydia found the God who was finding her.”⁴

I mean so many things
could have gone so differently.
Paul, Silas and Timothy
could have been stubborn
and decided they would go to Bithynia or bust.
They could have decided to ignore Paul’s vision
—after all Macedonia?
That was Paul’s first time in Europe!

Lydia could have had spring-time cold
or the stomach bug
or just decided to stay home
and watch First Neapolis’ prayer service
on livestream that morning.

Or even think back
to the very real controversy
of Peter’s vision to allow
preaching of the word
and table fellowship
to extend to the Gentile believers,

⁴ Ronald Cole-Turner, Acts 16:9-15 Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2 (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2009 pg.474)

like Lydia herself.⁵
Think of how differently
that could have ended.

What we encounter in Lydia
is a woman eager to hear the gospel.
A woman who is not defined
by a husband but by her occupation,
a dealer in purple cloth
—an extravagant textile
affordable only to the wealthy.
She is an independent woman
who is Paul's first convert in Europe.⁶
A woman of means and intention,
Lydia exemplifies the new doors
that have been opened in Jesus.

She is a faithful, wealthy Gentile woman
who invokes the hospitality of the Jews
and implores Paul and his entourage
to stay with her.

“To this day, it is a hallmark
of many Jewish communities
that unfamiliar participants in synagogue worship,
especially on Shabbat or holidays,
are invited to local people's homes for a meal
— and, if arrangements are made in advance,
frequently for lodging as well.”⁷

Lydia extended her own hospitality
as an outward sign
of her inward committed faithfulness to God.

Lydia is open to what God is doing,
even if it is through a foreigner.
Even if it demands something of her.

⁵ Ibid (pg.474-5)

⁶ David G. Forney, Acts 16:9-15 Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 2 (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2009 pg.476)

⁷ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-hospitality/>

Peter own's earlier declaration,
Who am I that I could hinder God?
echoes in our hearts
as Lydia and her household are all baptized
just like Cornelius and his household.

The Spirit is not willing to be contained or managed!
Lydia is so moved
by the good news shared with her,
that she is caught up in the wildly divine vision
of what Luke says Jesus commands the disciples,
at his ascension,
“that they are to be witnesses
to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

“A church was established in Philippi
because of Lydia's open heart
and her open home,
and it grew because of her patronage,
her initiative...
her ministry.”⁸

In fact we know that later on
in the 16th chapter of Acts,
after being release from prison,
Paul and Silas return to Lydia's house
“and when they had seen
and encouraged the brothers and sisters,
[that is the believers]
there they departed.” (Acts 16:40)

This group of faithful Philippians
surely sent Paul and Silas and Timothy
on their way with a little gift bags of water, mints,
a brochure that the associate and worship director drew up,
a free meal voucher next time they are in town,
a pen and sticky pad with First Philippi printed on it.

⁸ <https://margmowczko.com/lydia-of-thyatira-philippi/>

This Philippian church is special to Paul.

When he writes to them, he starts his letter with,

“I thank my God every I remember you,
constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers
for all of you...for God as my witness,
how I long for all of you
with the compassion of Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 1:3, 8)

What a coincidence Paul, and his brothers of the faith
joked with each other as they leave.

Philippi hadn't even been on their agenda
when they started out.

And can any of us

imagine our faith today
without the words of Philippians church,

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me;”

“Rejoice in the Lord always
and again I say rejoice;”

“Let the same mind be in you
that was in Christ Jesus ...”

Isn't it amazing how the Spirit works?

Thanks be to God that there are coincidences.

Thanks be to God for fate.

Thanks be to God for the Spirit's
leading and guiding,
pushing and prodding,
closing and opening
—and visions that are sometimes
wildly unmanageable.

