One of the things I enjoy about this season of our church year is that we spend time in the book, the Acts of the Apostles. Luke, the writer of the Gospel of the same name, is also the author of Acts. It is his chronicle of the missions of Jesus’ apostles. This is the story of the early church, and the main character the Advocate, the Sustainer, the promised Companion of the faithful, the manifestation of the Spirit of Christ, who accompanies the faithful as they continue in The Way. These are the stories of our history as Christian people.

We’ve all heard the saying *humans make plans and God has a good laugh.* There are some things that never quite go as we expect they will. That’s just life.

Today we travel with Paul as he sets out on his second missionary journey. Remember that Paul, in contrast to the Apostles, never met Jesus when he was here on Earth. Earlier in Acts, Paul makes it pretty clear that the encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road gave him all the authority he needs to carry the Good News to the world. His ideas and actions are controversial, as he brings Gentiles into the growing movement of Christ followers. In fact, in Paul’s own accounts of his meetings with Peter and company, he paints a much less congenial picture than Luke does in Acts.

I think it is safe to say that Paul didn’t suffer from a lack of confidence and likely did not play very well with others. Then it is no surprise that as he sets off on this next phase of his ministry, his plans become messed up as a result of a disagreement with Barnabas over staffing and they part ways.

So, we have change of plans…Paul sets off instead with Silas to visit the churches in Galatia and Phrygia. And it seems that the Spirit is not all in with Paul’s itinerary either, and for reasons undisclosed, the Spirit forbids Paul to speak the Word in Asia and in several other areas he had plans to visit.

Instead Paul receives a vision in the night where “a man of Macedonia” pleads with Paul to “come and help us”. Now convinced that they are called to bring the good news to Macedonia, Paul and company hop a ship to the busy trading city of Philippi. They stay in the area several days waiting for a sign. On the Sabbath they move down toward the river, perhaps anticipating they would find a group of devout Jewish men gathering to pray. But instead, they find the unexpected………a group of women who are there to pray. *(Down to the River to Pray)* Paul, not to be discouraged, sits down and begins to teach and the women listen in.

Lydia, a businesswoman is there. She is a dealer of purple cloth. Here’s your fun fact for the week….producing purple dye at that time was a very laborious and expensive exercise. The dye was gathered from a small mollusk found near Lydia’s home in Thyatira. It would have taken thousands of these tiny creatures to provide just a small amount of the dye necessary to produce the rich colors desired by the upper-class nobility privileged enough to afford her wares. (One source notes 9,000 mollusks to produce a gram)

Lydia is a well-to-do person in her own right, and she is a “worshipper of God” or “God fearer”, meaning she is likely a devotee of the One God and a supporter of Jews, but is not a Jew herself. This unlikely woman, in perhaps what is an unexpected profession for a woman of her time and place, listens to Paul’s teaching and is moved by the Spirit to open her heart and ask to be baptized. Lydia and her household become the first European converts to the Jesus movement!

Once again, the Spirit has surprised Paul! Lydia is not the person Paul and company expects to find on their first missionary foray into Europe. She is not “the man” from the vision that “needs their help”. This story is a wonderful example of God’s ability to work in the world despite our own designs………. BUT what really caught my attention is the last part of the last sentence. Luke says, *“when she and her household were baptized, she urged us saying, ‘if you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.’ And she prevailed upon us.”* (16:15)

I was intrigued by that word…prevailed. That is not a passive suggestion…prevailing upon someone. In the Bible translation, The Message, by Eugene Peterson, it says, “*We hesitated,* ***but she would not take no for an answer*.**” So, Paul and company could not refuse this woman, whose faith was ignited by the Spirit.

I don’t know about you, but there are times I find it much harder to accept a complement, or a gift, or someone’s help than it is for me to give to or serve another person. As a woman born and raised in the Episcopal Church, I was taught well from an early age that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Just think about when Jesus tries to wash Peter’s feet. Peter was mortified and could not allow himself to accept that gift of service from his teacher. It was embarrassing to him, perhaps even humiliating, until Jesus prevailed upon him. Jesus prevails again upon his friends today, with gift beyond their understanding, sending his Advocate, his loving Spirit to walk with them,……… and he leaves them with his Peace.

Peace……Jesus used that greeting, “*Peace”*, many times in his teaching to his followers. In Luke (10), as he sends out the seventy disciples to preach, teach and heal in God’s name, he tells them, to depend upon the hospitality of the villagers for their well-being – Carry no money, no sandals, no supplies. And he tells them, “*When ever you enter a house, first say, ‘Peace to this house’* “. And he tells them not to move around from place to place but to live among them, get to know the people and the place where they are staying….to accept their hospitality and let them get to know you.

When I attended Grace Church in Manchester, I was privileged to join in with my fellow parishioners a program there called Laundry Love. Laundry Love helps to relieve people of having to make a choice between having clean clothes and paying for essentials, like food, medicines and shelter. It takes place in a laundromat in a Manchester neighborhood where many working poor live. I have to confess, I was not at all comfortable the first time I walked into that space. Dwight Zscheile, in his book *People of the Way, Renewing Episcopal Identity[[1]](#footnote-1)*, told my dirty little secret, *“Part of the reason why so many Episcopalians feel paralyzed about reaching out to new populations, is that they feel culturally incompetent.”*

I didn’t know what to expect. I admit I was intimidated. I was terrified that I would not know what to say, how to “be” with the people I met there. Despite my own lack of confidence, I was sure that I was supposed to be there at Laundry Love to “serve my neighbor”. And if I am truly honest, I was feeling a little self-satisfied about the opportunity to be “doing good” for Jesus.

Let me tell you….I may have thought I was bringing Jesus into that place, but my dear friends, Jesus was there waiting for me! And he said to me, “Welcome Sandi, *Peace to you,* welcome to the Kingdom!*”*

Each and every time I was there at Laundry Love , I was the one that came away blessed. I remember a woman I met who was so kind and thoughtful to me, asking about a sick friend we had talked about in that place the month before. Burdens shared are burdens lessened.

I think the mathematics in God’s Kingdom is pretty wonky. It’s the only place I know where Broken + Broken = Blessed!

Sarah Miles, in her book about the food mission at St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion,* says this about Jesus’ way of insinuating into our carefully laid out plans. She says, *“He's the thrilling, scary Boyfriend who's going to dare you to do things you'd never dreamed of, shower you with unreasonable presents, and shows up uninvited at the most embarrassing times. Then he's going to stick with you, refusing to take the hint when you don't answer his calls.”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

I’m betting that when Paul and his companions went to Philippi to look for a “man from Macedonia” who needed their help, they never expected Jesus to meet them by the bank of the river with Lydia and her companions, who showered them with extravagant offers of their help in founding the first European churches. Lydia’s hospitality is the welcome of the Holy Spirit, expansive, insistent, and transformative.

I wonder, where will God send me, you, us in these days? Who will we meet along the way? And what gifts does the Spirit have in store for us?

Let us pray.

*Surprising God you came to us as a guest. Prevail upon us to recognize and graciously accept the unexpected gifts you give as we meet you here and there as servants and guests in your Kingdom. Amen.*

1. Zscheile, Dwight J. *People of the Way: Renewing Episcopal Identity*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Pub., 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Miles, Sara. *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)