

Today we are going to be reading from the New Testament book of Acts which documents Paul's three missionary journeys. A couple of weeks ago we read about Paul's conversion story and today we read about how Paul went about sharing the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ.

The text we are reading today comes from Paul's second journey and it is also considered the first time the Christian gospel was introduced into Europe. But as we will discover Paul did not set out to make a trip to Europe. Paul intended to go in the opposite direction.

Beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts we read that Paul and his ministry companion Silas meet a young Christian disciple named Timothy. Paul wants Timothy to accompany them on this missionary journey. Paul and Timothy and Silas were recorded as going to some towns and sharing about what God was actively doing through the Christian Church.

Paul, Timothy, and Silas plan to travel by land to Asia. This is where I want to invite us to pick up the story because they discover that their plans are not God's plans.

**Read Acts 16:6-18**

On Monday of this week I heard the startling statistic that 1 in 8 couples in the US have problems with fertility. I also heard that the month of May is National Infertility Month in order to draw attention to the pain that many couples are going through.

I posted this information on Facebook and also sent an email out to the congregation sharing this fact and asking for any feedback that people may have. I heard back from several women in the congregation and community that have dealt with infertility in their own relationships.

Others shared with me that they are trying to support family members and friends who are struggling with infertility issues. I don't know if this is accidental but National Infertility Month is also the same month that we celebrate Mother's Day as a country.

Mother's Day is a day of great celebration for many of us. I have heard that more phone calls will be made on this day than any other day of the year. Many restaurants look forward to this day because lots of mothers get taken out for meals. For many of us in our culture Mother's Day is a great day of celebration. I enjoyed talking to my mother on the phone yesterday which is the first Mother's Day for her after my Dad's death.

But as the emails back to me and the Facebook posts reveal, Mother's Day is a day of great agony and pain for many others. The many couples that have been unable to get pregnant or deliver a healthy child. This day is a difficult day for those of us who have lost children or our mothers to death. Others of us have had difficult relationships with our mothers or our children will not give us nice affirmations today.

Mother's Day is a day of celebration for some but pain for others. If we in the church do not recognize this diversity of reactions then we are being insensitive.

With that in mind, we turn back to our passage that we read today from Acts. In the passage that we read, Paul, Timothy, and Silas have good reasons to want to go to Asia to continue to do their missionary work. But the text says that the Holy Spirit will not allow them to go. The text never says how the Holy Spirit prevents them from going to Asia but the text simply says that the Holy Spirit will not allow them to go.

Is it one of those situations where everything just starts to go wrong and they finally decide that God does not want them to go? Maybe. We don't know. But what we do know is that they set out to do something important and they can't get it accomplished. They can't get what they want accomplished because of interference from God.

Can you relate to that? Do you know what it is like to make plans, good plans, but then events happen that keep you from getting done what you want to get done? Or you plan something really big and important that you know is going to accomplish something really big and important but your plans don't work out the way you want them to?

Do you know what it is like to get really frustrated because you feel like your life is stuck and every time you try to move forward something else happens to you that seems to challenge any hope that you have that things will get better?

This week I read about a woman named Amanda who was very excited because her dream of meeting and working with Mother Theresa was going to come true. Amanda took care of all of the necessary arrangements to travel to Calcutta and spend time with her idol Mother Theresa.

Amanda had prepared for months. She had dreams of maybe holding the hands of those who were nearing the end, or running programs for children that would help them to know that they were beloved children of God.

Only one big problem though. When Amanda arrived in India, Mother Teresa wasn't there. Amanda learned that her idol would be spending those months on an international benevolence tour. And then when Amanda reported for work her first day, she was placed in the kitchen, washing pots. And then the next day in the laundry, washing sheets. This went on for weeks, frustrating Amanda.

Amanda had made all of these plans to have this life changing experience with Mother Theresa and instead she found herself cleaning pots and doing laundry in Calcutta, India. Amanda felt as though this domestic work was a waste of time and money and such a disappointment to her.

Eventually Amanda told one of her supervisors, "Hey, I've been spending all of my time washing pots and cleaning sheets and folding bandages. I came here to work with Mother Teresa. I am not happy." Amanda then asked her supervisor this question, "So what does Mother Teresa do when she's here?" And the supervisor said this, "Well, when she's here, Mother Teresa cleans sheets, she folds bandages, and she washes pots."

When we are facing the obstacles that prevent us from whatever we think we need to accomplish or experience it can be very frustrating. We can feel as though there is a God who is working against us. Maybe there is a job that we are looking for. Maybe there is a move we are trying to make. Maybe there is a life change that we are trying to make.

On this Mother's Day we recognize some of the obstacles that many people face. The obstacles of a family that wants to get pregnant but their bodies prevent them. Maybe we feel the pain of wanting to share a story with a mother who because of death is not there anymore. Or maybe we look at another woman in our life and they seem like they would be such a better mother than we have.

But today we read about a God who sets up obstacles in one direction but opens up opportunities in another direction. While Paul and Silas and Timothy are trying to figure out their next steps after being prevented from going to Asia, Paul has a vision. In this vision Paul sees a man from Macedonia or modern day Greece who invites Paul to come to Macedonia.

Paul and Silas and Timothy have no desire to go to Greece. They feel called to go to Asia and minister among the Asian people. But these followers of God listen to this vision and set out across the sea and arrive in Europe.

After arriving in Macedonia, Paul and his companions travel through a couple of towns and then they end up in the town of Philippi. In Philippi they meet a woman named Lydia. Lydia is not from Philippi. She is a foreigner from Thyatira. And where is Thyatira? Thyatira is in Asia. Their call to the Asian people does not happen in Asia but in Europe.

Lydia is described as a businesswoman and she is not described by her relationship to a man which would have been very unusual for a woman. Lydia listens to what Paul has to say and is transformed by his words. She asks to be baptized and to have her entire family baptized. She then offers her home so that the Christian message can be spread throughout Europe.

Yes, you may be facing some big obstacles right now. Maybe some things are not going your way. Maybe you are encountering road block after road block. Maybe you have hit your frustration level limits.

I think that this story that we read today invites us to open up the possibility that the obstacles are telling us that we need to go in a different direction. Maybe we are not pursuing what God wants us to do. Maybe God yearns for us to head toward something new and different.

Paul had a vision in which he thought he was to meet up with a man from Macedonia. However, it was not a man that he was led to. It was a woman from a foreign town. This woman offered hospitality and the gospel was able to be spread.

As you recognize your obstacles be open to how God may be guiding you to go in a different direction. AMEN.

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-Sherouse, Alan, "Walking Downhill," Day 1 broadcast from May 8, 2016 and found at

[http://day1.org/7239-walking\\_downhill](http://day1.org/7239-walking_downhill)

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