

I don't know about you but I find myself a little bit jealous when people tell me that they know exactly what God wants them to do with their life. I find myself a bit jealous when I hear someone tell me that they know exactly what God's plan is for them.

Of course, I also know some people who have told me that God had revealed some clear plans to them and then they head down a well scripted path and then become frustrated when life does not work out like they thought it was supposed to. I know some people who were so very sure that their marriage was ordained by God, their business venture blessed by God, their move to a new community was blessed by God.

But then I have heard some people express great confusion when their marriage ended in divorce, their business venture collapsed, their move to a new community turned into a disaster. And then they find themselves questioning why things fell apart because they were so sure that their strategic plan was guided by God. Usually it is not long before they find a new vision from God and head down a different path.

If you are someone who struggles with trying to find direction from God and what vision from God means, then today's second lesson might provide some helpful guidance for you today. I know it is for me.

We are reading from Acts. Sometimes called the Acts of the Apostles. Acts is the first book of the Bible after the gospel stories. The four gospels tell us about the life of Jesus. The book of Acts tells us about the early church. One of the four gospel writers was named Luke. Luke was also the writer of Acts.

Prior to our reading, we discover that Paul, the person who becomes one of the earliest evangelists, meets up with a disciple named Timothy. Timothy is from a mixed marriage. His mother was Jewish and his father was a Greek.

Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him and he does something that certainly makes the males in the room uncomfortable. Paul has Timothy circumcised so that he will fit in with the Jewish crowd.

Paul and Timothy travel from town to town and share with the different communities about decisions that had been made by the Jewish Christian leadership in Jerusalem. The churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily. But now pay attention to what happens next.

### **Read Acts 16:6-8**

We usually think of the Holy Spirit as being a “yes” character. We usually think of the Holy Spirit as creating and providing opportunities. But in this Scripture which we just read, the Holy Spirit becomes a “no” character. The Holy Spirit prevents Paul and Timothy from going to Asia. Paul and Timothy wanted to go north to Bithynia but the Holy Spirit does not allow them. Instead, they end up in Troas.

### **Read Acts 16: 9-10**

Macedonia would be the area around modern day Greece. It would be considered the eastern portion of Europe. So Paul has this vision in the night that he is to go to Europe. In this vision he sees a man from Macedonia who invites him to come to Greece.

### **Read Acts 16: 11-15**

So Paul and Timothy immediately set sail for Greece. They decide to go to the town of Philippi. Philippi was a town of about 15,000 people. It had a large number of retired military personnel. It had a small percentage of very wealthy people, lots of blue collar workers, and about ¼ of its citizens were poor. Sounds pretty similar to most communities that we know here in the US.

We are told that Paul and Timothy are in Philippi but there is no mention that they ever find the man that invited them in the vision to come. They hang out in Philippi for several days but there is no mention of meeting the man that invites them. So what has gone wrong? They followed the vision that they knew was from God, they travel to Philippi, and for several days they find nothing.

Remember when I said that I get a little jealous of people who have a clear strategic plan for how God has revealed to them what they are to do in their life. In the Scripture we have been reading, the strategic plan that Paul and Timothy have been laying out for themselves does not seem to be working out. They map out a plan and it is like the Holy Spirit says to them, “no.”

So Paul and Timothy decide to go outside the city by the river. They go out there because it is the Sabbath and they hope to find a group of people praying there. They find a group of women. They discover that one of the women, named Lydia, is a worshipper of God. She is from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. Purple would be worn by the rich people in town so Lydia is a businesswoman who works with the wealthy people in town.

The gospel writer Luke then tells us that God opens her heart and she listens to what Paul and Timothy have to say. Lydia has her entire household baptized and then Lydia invites Paul and Timothy to stay at her home and continue their ministry in the community.

This story has three lessons to teach us, I think. First, Lydia was a woman of prayer. She gathered, we think, most every Sabbath day and asked God to lead her. So for us to discern our vision of God in our life, we need to be people of prayer.

We need to be praying for our own lives. We need to be praying for this church. We need to be praying for our community. We need to be praying for our nation. We need to be praying for our world. As Lydia teaches us, we need to be people of prayer.

The second lesson from this story is that we need to be open to hearing “no” from God’s Holy Spirit. I am as guilty as anyone in looking for God to confirm what I already believe. We make up our mind about something and then we look for proof in Scripture and in life’s experiences to confirm what we already have decided.

Some of the best Christians I know can also be people who quickly decide the will of God and look for God to confirm what they have decided. But I think this story teaches us that we must not be too quick to jump and decide what God’s strategic plan is for our life and our church and our community and nation.

We want quick answers and quick strategic plans. But sometimes God’s Holy Spirit may be trying to prevent us from doing something that we have already decided in our head we are to do. Sometimes God may be saying “no” to us so that we can hear God’s “yes” to us. Remember, God was the one who opened Lydia’s heart to hear. Let us not be too quick to decide what God is saying to us.

The third lesson I invite us to take away from this Scripture is the importance of the faith community in helping one another along the road of faith. The church community plays a central role in this story.

A vital church is one where people learn from one another and help one another figure out what God is doing in our community, in our lives, and in the faith community. Lydia and the group of women gathered together that day to worship God.

Three lessons that I think are offered up today to help us figure out what we are to do with our lives and in our church and in community.

Pray for God's wisdom and guidance.

Be open to God's Spirit saying "no" to your strategic plan so that God can give you a "yes" to God's will.

And invite yourself into a church community and seek to strengthen the faith community to help one another along this path of faith.

Now let us go forth and seek God's direction together. AMEN.

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### **Prayer of Confession**

Because you dwell in our hearts, Eternal God, you know how the anger, the pain, the bitterness of our lives try to crowd you out. The noise of the world deafens us to that Word which can heal us. We want our children to be good, kind, and gentle to others, and then they hear us call others names, and speak of them with demeaning words. Our desire for revenge towards those who have hurt us shows that your peace, indeed, is not in us. You promise a new heaven and a new earth, so create new spirits and new lives within us, Healing God.

### **Prayers of the People**

Holy are you, God who makes all things new. Hearing our cries for help in the dark nights of the soul, Christ came bringing the light of your love; finding us living in sin, he came to make a home for us; Going to the cross for us, he went into death's cold tomb, so we might not be afraid, but cradled in the warmth of the power of the resurrection. Like a tree planted by living water is the person who commits to your ways, O Lord. Nourish us with your disciplining love; prune our branches for growth. Teach us also to recognize good fruit and to recoil from the bitterness of the bad.

We gather together today seeking to understand your will for our lives. Too often we are quick to decide what your will is. Teach us to be prayerful, patient, and open to the "no" that you sometimes give to us. Give us wisdom to go places that we would only go with your guidance and blessing.