

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, C

Acts 16:9-15

Church

Psalm 67

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

John 14:23-29

Melinda J. Wagner

First Immanuel Lutheran

Portland, Oregon

May 9, 2010

A friend of mine is planning a two-week trip to Greece, dreaming of islands and blue seas and ancient ruins and adventure. Her husband has never been to Europe, so this is a special and exciting opportunity to get away as a couple. She's been doing all the things you do to get ready for a big trip-- arranging care for their home and their teenage son, planning what to take, how to pack efficiently. Her husband is reading up on history, researching places to see, making airplane and hotel reservations, checking on the exchange rate. Given the situation in Greece today, they've been worrying a little about the possibility of riots or strikes or volcanoes disrupting their travel. They want things to go just right.

People have different approaches to travel. Most of us probably plan things my friend's way, checking details twice and three times to be sure. Some prefer to be more spontaneous, adventurous. Just throw a suitcase in the car for a road trip across the US, or buy a Eurail pass and take the train around Europe wherever the spirit leads you.

The apostle Paul was the second type of traveler – minus the Eurail pass of course — literally led by the Spirit in preaching and planting churches. The book called Acts of the Apostles could be seen as one big travel adventure tracing how the good news of Christ traveled out from Jerusalem all the way to Rome.

Last week we heard about Peter, the leader in Jerusalem, being persuaded in a dramatic vision to start sharing the good news with non-Jews, or Gentiles. That decision set God's word free to travel, and it was Paul who carried God's word over land and sea in three long missionary journeys around the Mediterranean.

When Paul set out, he didn't have a travel agent or GPS or even safe and reliable means to get around. The book of Acts is full of stories of shipwrecks and detours and dangers. Time and again, things did not go as Paul planned.

First there was the issue of traveling companions. The verses just before today's reading tell us Paul planned to travel with Barnabas, but they quarreled because Barnabas wanted to bring along Mark, who Paul had quarreled with before. You do get the idea Paul wasn't overly easy to get along with. So Paul changed his plans and chose Silas and Timothy to go with him.

Second problem was the itinerary. Unlike my friend and her husband, Paul didn't start out to take a trip to Europe – though he did end up going there. His original plan was to tour around the large land mass of Asia Minor, where Turkey is today, visiting churches he'd already started and planting new ones. But God redirected them. The Bible says "they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia" – what does that mean? Maybe problems getting there, or opposition along the way, or other barriers they understood as signs from God. Looking at the map you can see they covered hundreds of frustrating miles before Paul received a vision, in a dream, of a "man from Macedonia" pleading with them to come over – you guessed it – to visit Europe. The gospel had never been preached on that continent before. So instead of heading north over land, they crossed to the west over the sparkling blue Aegean Sea to reach the northern part of – you guessed it – Greece.

No hotel reservations, of course, as they made their way along the Egnatian Way, the major trade route to carry goods and soldiers from Rome through the eastern reaches of the empire. Philippi was near the eastern end of this ancient highway.

As we read this story we get the picture that Paul and Silas and Timothy were not just spontaneous but *responsive* to God. And they were looking for people who would be equally responsive. When Paul entered a new town he usually looked for a synagogue to start preaching the message of Jesus Christ, but in Philippi there was no synagogue, just a gathering of people praying outside the city by a river. And turns out they weren't "men of Macedonia" like the vision, but women. Another holy change of plans.

Lydia was there, a "God-worshipper" – one of those "God-fearers" we talked about last week – a seeker. She was probably not Jewish but she respected God and prayed to God, and she put herself in places where she could get to know God. So when Paul began to teach, Lydia was so ready that she quickly received the message of Jesus Christ who had died and risen to save her and all people. She became the first Christian in Europe.

I have quite a soft spot for Lydia. In fact, if we'd had a daughter, I would have lobbied to name her Lydia (not sure what Aaron's vote would have been on that one). I love Lydia because she was such an eager seeker, so open and ready to meet God. I marvel at how quickly she let the good news find a home in her, and how quickly she opened her own home to Paul and Silas and Timothy. I'm impressed by how eagerly she changed her own plans, shifted her own loyalties and embraced baptism not only for herself but her household.

I'm also impressed that Lydia was such an independent, apparently powerful woman. We don't have many women like this in scripture, and it may be that Macedonian culture women did have more freedom and public influence than they

did elsewhere. Lydia was the head of her own household, not the property of any man, and as such she was responsible for the spiritual welfare of those under her roof, relatives and servants alike. That's how they all came to be baptized.

Lydia was also a merchant trading along that Egnatian Way, and she had to be a wealthy and influential merchant because she traded in purple cloth, which was so rare and expensive it could only be worn by royalty and the very rich. The purple dye was made in Lydia's home town of Thyatira, and it took huge quantities of a certain sea snail to make the color. Lydia must have moved in the highest circles of influence.

And what did Lydia do with her influence and power? She put it into the service of Christ. She offered her large house to the missionaries and later for a house church. Her hospitality showed she understood the Christian lifestyle of providing for one another. Lydia was generous, and so was the church that grew in her home. They shared their wealth to support Paul in his ongoing travels, and over time they earned a special place in his crotchety old heart. Many people have noticed that Paul's letter to the Philippians has an especially joyful spirit, and this surely reflects the warmth of the church that grew from Lydia's response to Christ.

We don't know whether Lydia was a mother or not – but on this Mother's Day when we give credit to the women who've shaped our lives, we can gratefully count Lydia as one of our mothers in faith. Like Paul, she was willing to have her life's travel plans redirected, and we are richer for it.

There's an old joke: "If you want to make God laugh, tell God your plans." Because so often it seems God has something different in mind for us than we imagine. And while I don't believe God predetermines the future, I do believe we live our lives in a kind of dynamic partnership with God. As events happen and opportunities or decisions arise, God helps us feel our way forward. In turn, our choices lead into new paths, a tapestry being woven in partnership with God all along.

Most of us can look back over our lives and see turning points: a certain person we met, a trip we took, a change in jobs, a move to a new city, an illness or a healing, a loss or a gift...

And perhaps we can look at our lives today, and see urgings toward an upcoming choice or decision. Something we're facing that we need God's help with.

When we are eager and open to meet God, like Lydia... When we are willing to make detours, like Paul... When we offer ourselves as seeking, receptive partners with God, life-giving things can happen.

I pray for us a measure of Paul and Silas and Timothy's roving adventurousness, and the good humor to change course when we need to.

And I pray for us a measure of Lydia's hospitality to just be so open to God and to others that we can welcome new ways of learning and growing.

And today as we welcome Sami and Deanne into the congregation, I can't help reflecting that there are plenty of willing spirits among us now – plenty of open and eager hearts – and that God never disappoints. God who washes Sami with grace today washes all of us in goodness, grounds us in unconditional love, and forgives us with a depth of compassion we can scarcely take in. In the power of God's generous spirit, God's church is still growing today, and we are joyfully part of it. Thanks be to God. Amen.