

“Come Help Us”

In the name of him who has overcome the world, dear friend in Christ: It must have been a profoundly disappointed Apostle Paul who fell asleep in the city of Troas on the night he had the vision we heard about in this morning's reading from the book of Acts. He was now well into his second mission journey, and though he had traveled many a weary mile, at this point he had nothing to show for it. The whole thing had even begun badly. He and his close friend and fellow evangelist Barnabas, with whom he had taken the enormously successful first mission journey, had a falling out over whether young John Mark should accompany them. Mark had started out with them on the first mission, but then he got cold feet when the going got tough and he turned back, abandoning Paul and Barnabas who had been depending on him. Paul wasn't about to have any quitters with him this time around; while the ever-optimistic Barnabas insisted that John Mark deserved another chance. It was a dispute the two men could not resolve, and so they parted company. Barnabas took Mark with him to Cyprus to spread the Gospel there. And Paul got himself a new partner named Silas.

These two began by visiting the churches that Paul and Barnabas had founded during the first mission in the southeast corner of what is Turkey today. They spent some time with each congregation, teaching, encouraging, and correcting any misunderstandings they had about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But this was just the first step. Paul's big plan was to head west into the province of Asia where there were dozens of cities and towns that had yet to hear the saving message of Jesus. He was eager to go to them; but strangely – almost inexplicably – we're told that the Holy Spirit prevented them from going to those places to preach the Gospel. Not to be deterred, the two evangelists tried going north toward the Black Sea into the province of Bithynia where there were other ripe harvest fields for the Gospel; but that was no good either. Again, the Spirit prevented them from going. So, what happened was that the two men pursued a rather zigzag course all across the mostly uninhabited places of the land mass that is Turkey until they arrived at Troas, a little fishing village on the tip of the northwest coast. It wasn't far from the ruins of what had once been the mighty city of Troy; but that city and its large population were long gone. Paul and Silas had come to what was quite literally the end of the Asian continent. They had traveled hundreds of miles, and were much, much farther away from home than they ever planned to be when they started out. And still they hadn't been able to preach the Gospel to anyone or win a single soul for Christ.

And that's why I say Paul must have been a very disappointed. He had accomplished nothing that he had hoped to do. He must have thought the whole trip was wasted effort. When he went to sleep that night in Troas, he was worn out, frustrated, and feeling like a colossal failure. No doubt he was ready to call it quits and turn back the way they came.

But, as we heard, the Lord had other plans for Paul. In a vision by night Paul saw a man from Macedonia (which was across the sea in Greece – on the European continent). The man was calling to Paul and saying, “Cross over here. Come, help us.” You see, it had never occurred to Paul to go on into Greece. He was thinking that the Gospel should be advanced step by step – like ripples spreading out on a pond – first in

Jerusalem, then to the areas around it, and spreading out from those areas to the ones next in line in a slow, steady progression. And that would have worked – *eventually* – but the Lord wanted to speed things up. His plan was to send Paul out like a stone skipping across the surface of the pond; leaping, as it were, from place to place, so that from each point Paul touched down and started a church – at Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth – a new set of ripples would start to spread as each of these congregations sent their own evangelists to the areas around them. So, what had seemed to Paul to be a series of failures and interference by the Holy Spirit, who kept him from preaching the Word where he wanted to, was actually the Lord’s way to get the Good News of the saving message of Christ out to more people even quicker.

And I think that this is something we need to keep in mind in our own church’s evangelism efforts. We are always coming up with programs and plans, and targeting certain persons, groups of people, or places for evangelization. And it’s good that we come up with such plans and pursue them. At the same time, we ought not to get frustrated if things don’t go the way we hoped they would. Jesus is still the Lord of the Church, and he is responsible for its growth in this world. And what may seem to be a failure to us may be the Lord’s way of opening a new door that we never even thought about. Surely, though, when such a door opens, we ought to step through it.

And with that in mind, I’d like to consider the vision itself that the Lord sent Paul. It’s interesting to me the way the Lord did it. I mean, Jesus could have appeared himself in the vision. He had appeared to Paul before. He could have done it again and said, “Paul! Paul, listen to me! I want you to go to Macedonia and preach the Gospel to those people over there! So, what are you waiting for? Get going!” He *could* have done that ... and I suppose it would have been effective. After all, if Jesus appeared to you and told you to do something, you’d do it, *wouldn’t you?* And double quick too. But that’s not what Jesus did. Instead he sent Paul a vision of a man from across the sea calling out for help. Why do you suppose he did that?

The answer is that the Lord wanted Paul – and all of us too who read this account – to see things from his perspective. Too often in the church the passage that we call Christ’s Great Commission – “Go ye into all the world and make disciples of all nations” – is used as a stick to drive Christians to the work of evangelism, and to make them feel guilty if they miss an opportunity to share the Gospel. And so the motivation for doing evangelism is the Law. Do it because you must! Do it because Christ commands you! By showing Paul (and us) the man from Macedonia calling for help, Jesus invites us to see things the way they really are. There are people out there who need our help. There are people out there dying in their sins and ignorance, living their lives in fear of the unknown or under the bondage of false religions that tell them all the things they must do to be saved. They are lost. They are helpless. They are dying and going to hell.

That’s exactly where we were at some point in our lives. That’s how Christ saw us. And in response to our great need, he came. He crossed over to us. He lived his life among us – and he gave it up as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. He did this because of his great love for us. And now that he has called us by the Gospel to trust in him and forgiven our sins, he gives us his Holy Spirit by whom he also fills us with his love so that we can see and respond to the needs of others.

Needs that they don't even know they have. The man from Macedonia, remember, was in a vision sent from God. There was no *real* person saying to Paul, "Come over and help us." There couldn't have been. No one in Macedonia knew Paul or that he was in Troas; but more to the point, no one there knew what they were missing by not having the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Lord put the words in the man's mouth to ask for what the Macedonians didn't even know they needed.

And that too informs us. We are surrounded by such people. Many of them are our friends and neighbors. They are the people of our community among whom we live and work. We do business with them every day. And most of them haven't the foggiest notion of the danger they are in. Some of them think of themselves as spiritual or religious; but they don't know Christ. Others are proud of their skepticism and unbelief. Some are members of churches – at least their names appear on the roles – but they never attend and couldn't begin to explain what the Christian faith is really about. And still others are active members of churches where the Gospel is never proclaimed; where they only hear about what they must do to please God, instead of what Christ has done to reconcile them to God. All of these people share one thing in common: they are dying in their sin and ignorance. In the man from Macedonia the Lord gives them a voice. They are crying out to us, "Come help us." And though they do not know it, we have what they need. We can give them Jesus the Savior, and by trusting in him they can have the forgiveness, freedom, and life we have in him.

Paul and Silas, we know, made the crossing; but when they arrived at Philippi, they didn't find a crowd gathered waiting to hear from them. They didn't even find a Jewish synagogue, which is where Paul would normally have begun to speak of Jesus. When proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, it made the most sense to start with the people who knew what the Messiah was and were expecting him to come one day. Apparently, there were too few people who practiced the Jewish faith in the city for them to have a synagogue. Instead, Paul and his companion heard a rumor about a handful of women who on Saturdays (the Jewish Sabbath) met for prayer outside the city by the river. They took a chance that they might be Greek proselytes to the Jewish faith. As it happened, they were; and so, Paul spoke to them about Jesus.

And there are a couple things to point out here. The first is that after the vision of the man from Macedonia, Paul might have been expecting a larger more promising audience to preach to than a few women who were meeting at what was essentially the city Laundromat. It sure didn't look like much; but this small, humble group turned out to be the charter membership of the first Christian church in Europe – a church that grew to become one of the most vibrant and evangelistic churches mentioned in the Bible. And it's interesting to me that the first man from Macedonia to become a believer in Christ turned out to be a woman – a successful business woman, in fact, named Lydia.

The second thing to note here is what the Bible says about Lydia's conversion. Paul was teaching about Jesus, but we read, "The Lord opened her heart to pay close attention to what Paul was saying". This is key. All any evangelist can ever do is talk about Jesus and what he did to save a world dying in sin; but it is the Lord who opens hearts and grants the gift of faith. Too often people who share the Gospel want to keep score. They credit themselves for successful conversions, or they blame themselves when the Gospel is rejected. Neither is allowable from a Scriptural point of view. The love of Christ we have and want to share compels us to speak what we know of Jesus

with those who need our help; but it is the Lord alone who opens hearts to receive the Gospel of salvation.

So, we needn't burden ourselves with the fear of failure – which I know is a big reason Christians use to remain silent. The other big ones are, “But I don't know what to say or when to say it.” Regarding *when*, the answer is whenever an opportunity presents itself. Not every moment in life is the right moment to share your faith in Jesus, and Christians who think any moment will do usually manage only to irritate the people they hope to evangelize. On the other hand, we see in this morning's reading that small opportunities can arise in unexpected places – and that they can lead to big results; so it's fitting that we remain alert and capitalize on whatever opening the Lord grants us.

And regarding *what* to say, it really isn't that difficult. You talk about Jesus. You talk about what he did for you. You talk about the forgiveness and assurance and peace of mind and eternal life you have in him. And you use the resources the Lord has given you. And this is where I am going to be like the man from Macedonia asking for your help. I made these comments in an evangelism meeting we had here at the church late last summer; but a lot of you couldn't be there so I'm going to repeat a little of what I said then. We live in a culture in which the church in general and pastors in particular are viewed with a heavy dose of suspicion. We hear the complaint all the time that those who proclaim the Gospel are only after your money. And sadly, there are some out there for whom that is their only motivation who give the rest of us a bad name.

But here's what it is: something like ninety percent of the people with whom I come into contact in this community are already in the church. They are *you* because that's the nature of my work. The other ten percent, when they find out I'm a pastor, put up their guard. They are suspect, intimidated, fearful of being manipulated – whatever. They don't want to talk about spiritual matters with me. But they will talk with you about such things from time to time. And this is where you can help me cross over and connect with them.

Say you're having one of those conversations. The door opened for you to say something about your faith in Jesus, and, as often happens, they come back with one of those tough questions that you're not sure how to answer. That's when you say, “That's a really good question. Hey, I know: let's ask my pastor. And you call me, right then and there. Or you tell them you'll ask and get back to them. Or you E-mail me. Or you set up a meeting. You be the bridge. You help me prove to them that what we're about here in the church of Jesus Christ is helping people and bringing them to the knowledge of the truth. I know from teaching adult instruction that a lot of people have the wrong idea about who we are and what we teach. And I have seen them lifted from doubt and despair when they finally understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all of its truth and purity, when they comprehend what Baptism really is, and when they know what's going on in the Lord's Supper. It's amazing – a wonderful thing to behold; but they need our help.

So, let's do that. From the love of Christ that we have received, let's reach out to the Macedonians all around us who need what we have and what can give them, making the most of the opportunities the Lord grants us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!