

Sometimes I read scripture in preparation for weekend worship  
and the message seems clear:

Focused and to the point.

A theme rises to the surface as I read through the texts the first time.

It's just great.

And then there are weeks like this one,

when I just cannot figure out what God wants me to say.

Lord, it is Mother's Day and Lydia,

the mother of Christianity in Europe is in the text,

do you want me to talk about moms? (Silence)

Okay, Lord, I hear a lot about water in these passages

and we have two baptisms at the 11:15 service,

do you want me to talk about the baptismal promises you make to us?

(Silence)

These scripture lessons seem to be highlighting the importance of community, Lord,

do you want me to talk about how we live and work together

as the Body of Christ? (Silence)

Nothing.

A big fat goose egg this week, every time.

No rush of wind, no Oprah Ah-Ha moments, no still small voice, nothing.

What does God want us to hear this week?

What does he have to say to us?

In laboring over this predicament,

it occurred to me that perhaps I am not the first preacher

to wrestle with this struggle.

Recognizing God's direction is not always easy to discern.

And sometimes only becomes clear after trial and error.

Or perhaps trial and redirection.

And both of the scripture lessons we just read together

seem to point to that one area of focus quite clearly,  
even if their means of getting there is a bit different.

In our lesson from Acts this morning,

we are joining Paul and his entourage in the midst of a journey.

They are currently in Troas or Troy,

on the northwestern edge of modern-day Turkey.

Just prior to today's lesson we learned that Paul and his companions

have tried their hardest to spread the gospel in Asia.

Two different times they tried to make inroads in their proclamation.

They did everything they could

to evangelize the people in three different regions of Asia

and were prevented by the Holy Spirit.

That is how their actions are described.

God's Holy Spirit prevented them from preaching the gospel.

So they were rather forced to Troy.

There, in the middle of the night, Paul has an ah-ha moment.

In a dream, Paul had a vision.

A man from Macedonia appeared to him

pleading for Paul to come over and help them.

So Paul and his team do a little puddle jumping

and make their way to Philippi, a rather well to do Roman colony in Macedonia.

Philippi at the time was an up and coming, prosperous small town.

Its citizens enjoyed tax benefits by living there and supporting Roman culture.

There is very little evidence that this town had any Israelite influence.

Scholars think the main religion of the day was the cult of the emperor

and the worship of many Greek gods.

Philippi was on the main road that led, well where else, but to Rome  
and only 12 miles from a sea port.

Good location, easy to get to and a wealthy town.

This was where God sent them.

And so with great faith and obedience, Paul goes to Macedonia.

He had a vision of a man, but when he gets there, Paul doesn't meet a man.

Instead God leads him to a group of women.

On the Sabbath, a group of women were gathered at a river to pray.

Traditionally, if no synagogue or church structure was available,  
members of the early church would gather near rivers for worship.

And here Paul finds a group of women, led by Lydia, a business person,  
gathering to pray.

I read this passage and I wonder, God, what were you up to?

What were you doing with these women

that got them to that river that made them open and receptive to hear you?

Given their place in Macedonia,

it's very likely that they had never heard the name Jesus before.

Chances are likely they had all grown up not knowing

any type of faith tradition other than to worship the emperor.

So how did God get their attention?

Paul and his companions joined their worship that morning.

They met these women where they were in their routine of life.

And God opened Lydia's heart to hear Paul preach the gospel.

The result was that Lydia and her household were baptized that day.

And what a day that must have been.

Certainly, Lydia and the other women had no idea

what was going to happen in their lives that morning.

How would Lydia have known that she was about to become  
the mother of Christianity for Europe?

To this day she is still revered as a saint, especially in Greece.

And she is known as the first Christian convert in Europe.

And all she did was go down to the river to pray.

But God got a hold of her.

God opened her heart and used Paul to get her to hear the gospel – eagerly.

Then, God took her into that river,

claimed her as his own in the waters of baptism and never let go.

Through Lydia, God grew the fledgling Christian church in Europe.

Later in Acts, Paul will return to her house

and her home will become a house church in Philippi.

And let's not forget that we still have a letter Paul wrote to that church,  
the letter to the Philippians, recorded in our scriptures.

Hopefully, Lydia's story is one to which we can all relate.

Each one of us has heard God's word in some form,

hopefully, we have each been influenced by a companion  
on our faith journey.

We have each prodded others along the way.

But my guess is that some of us resonate a little bit more with Paul's story this week.

We try to do the right thing.

We try to follow God's word.

We try to discern God's guidance and follow his direction,  
but we keep getting it wrong.

We keep going one way

and then the Spirit intervenes and prevents us.

Oh Lord, if you would just give us a sign!

But even when God does give us signs, are we paying attention?

Are we listening?

Can we hear God's voice above the information overload,  
the over-stimulation we all experience these days?

It's tough to tell sometimes.

It's tough to tell if we are following God's direction  
or just cutting our own path.

For Paul, it took a few tries and I think that isn't too out of the ordinary.

In my life, I have found that often times the Holy Spirit is pretty clear with no's,  
but can be a little fuzzy with the yeses.

In other words, when I am being prevented from doing something,  
the door usually closes forcefully.

But when I'm being led to something or toward someone  
the path is usually only illuminated one step at a time,  
on a need to know basis.

And often times, God doesn't feel that I need to know very quickly.

Frustrating.

But with Paul, we are in good company  
And we can rest assured that God's apparent silence  
doesn't equate God's absence.

God being silent doesn't mean that God is absent.

It may mean that God is encouraging us, though.

It may mean that God is asking us, like Lydia,  
to take the gifts and skills that he has given us and put them to use.

God may be encouraging us to listen to him in different ways.

God may be encouraging us to change direction at his prodding.

Let's keep in mind that the lesson from Acts tells us  
that God came to Paul in a dream  
and that God opened Lydia's heart for her

to hear the good news of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

From this we can also infer that God meets us where we are.

God is intimately involved in getting our attention  
in whatever way we can best hear him.

Maybe that is in a dream, something I don't think we consider very often.

Maybe God is getting our attention through worship, through scripture,  
during moments of prayer,  
in conversation with another brother or sister in Christ.

Maybe through a still small voice that nudges our minds and tugs at our hearts  
refusing to let go.

However God is reaching you and I think he meets each of us where we are,  
let's not forget that communication is a two way street.

In order to hear God's voice, we are called to listen.

That is just as true for us as individuals in our lives outside these four walls  
as it is for us as a congregation.

And as the disciples of Jesus at Epiphany Lutheran Church,  
there is a lot going on for us.

This afternoon (tomorrow afternoon) we will have one more congregational meeting.

This one is to finalize the permanent loan  
for the new construction of our future Austin Campus.

The building that will soon be the anchor of that new campus  
will be completed in a few short months.

Our capital campaign has officially wrapped up.

And we are still wrestling with our own conflict and pain.

With so much going on, it can feel like we are in the midst of chaos,  
jumping from one issue that needs all of our attention  
to another issue that needs all of our attention.

But God is still here in the midst of us, calling out to us.

Opening our hearts for us to eagerly listen to him.

For us to prevail upon others and offer our gifts and talents whatever they may be  
in response to our excitement for spreading the good news.

The challenge for us with so much going on is to be focused.

To listen for God's voice,

to have the discipline to stay on course and not be distracted.

To celebrate where God has led us thus far

and to look to where God is leading us now.

This will take the Spirit closing some doors for us and opening others.

This will take all of us being in conversation with each other  
in order to move forward together.

This will take focus.

A lot of focus to stay the course, not to get distracted and not to give up hope.

Trusting that God promises to be with us and refuses to leave us alone.

We are in a place where our next course is not set.

We haven't been given a travel guide

to get us to the next destination in our life together.

I have a feeling that path will be illuminated one step at a time.

This can be a challenge,

but also a time where we are called more than ever

to listen for God and be aware of his presence.

You know, it occurs to me sometimes we're like Paul – being sent to tell God's story.

And other times we're like Lydia

– having our hearts opened and hearing God's story

in a renewed way that inspires us to act in new and different ways.

However God is calling us now, one thing is clear:

The Spirit is guiding us to do a new thing, to move forward one step at a time.

To step out of our comfort zones and trust his guidance.

To stay focused on the cross and use it as our guide.

And to continually come down together to the shores of the baptismal river to pray.