

A Tale of Two Cities – John Brittingham

Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29

I want you to imagine something with me for a bit. I want you to try to really stretch your creative muscles and imagine that you are a devout Christian white person from the Midwest with a desire to follow God wherever God may lead. Being this devout Christian white person from the Midwest with a desire to follow God, you pray a lot, you read your Bible a lot, you sing pop songs to Jesus a lot. After all, you are a devout Christian white person from the Midwest. Now, stay with me, I know this is hard to wrap your mind around, having to imagine you're a creature so alien to your everyday life as the kind of person I'm describing.

Anyway, imagine that one day, during your devotions or personal Bible study or something very evangelical, you have a vision. Not like one of those peyote-fueled, quasi-shamanistic dream quest-type visions where you wake up in the automotive aisle of a Walmart with your face covered in peanut butter convinced that you should now devote your life to becoming an expert at crafting edible arrangements. Not like that. I'm talking about the kind of vision where you feel pulled towards a vague yet unmenacing geographical location or group of people. You, in this imagined scenario, are having this kind of vision. God or the voice in your head is telling you to head to one of those great big cities on the East Coast of the United States where people are in desperate need of God.

You, being a devout Christian white person from the Midwest, cannot shake this vision. You tell your Bible study friends. You start talking about heading off to the great secular East Coast. Your vision is now no longer yours. Now it is the vision of a number of devout Christian white people from the Midwest. A kind of mini exodus then takes place. You pack up your family, your friends pack up their family and head off towards the big bad city. All because of this vision.

Now this is not just some strange thing that I wanted you to imagine. This is the sort of thing that actually happened. When I was living in Boston, I ended up attending a church led by a bunch of devout Christian white people from the Midwest who had PowerPoint slides with cool fonts and a loud power pop band with the obligatory solitary female member on the keyboard singing pop songs to Jesus. They had had a vision and that vision said they needed to move from the land of Lincoln to that secular bastion of scum and villainy known as Boston, Mass. You know Boston, that city founded by people who had a vision that they needed to leave that secular bastion of scum and villainy known as England—Boston, the city by the bay that gave us Puritans, and Cotton Mather, and America's first institution of higher learning, Harvard Seminary—Boston, where you can't walk two blocks without passing a church older than most states. But that's where God sent these devout Christian white people from the Midwest. They had a vision after all.

In recent years, evangelical-leaning Christians have moved back to cities with increasing intensity. They have sought to bring the good news to these urban centers, imagining them to be dens of scum and villainy. Whether this is the gospel of pop songs to Jesus or the cruciform gospel preached by Paul is another question. Whether this rise in urban-oriented Christianity has

coincided with the rise in gentrification is another question worth wrestling with. But all things in due time—for now, let’s talk about visions.

In his commentary on our Acts selection, Bruce Cromwell reminds us that visions are not really that weird when considering the whole of the Biblical canon. Within Acts itself we see multiple visions. Specifically, within Paul’s story alone we get multiple visions. As has been widely reported, Paul has a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus, but he also had visions immediately before the one he has in our lectionary reading.

When we meet Paul and company, they’re hanging out in the sweet Turkish beach town of Troas, having been denied a mandate to take the gospel to Asia (which at that time meant the rest of Turkey). Instead, Paul has a vision to go to Macedonia. This simple change of plans is huge. I want to focus on the Acts passage today because I think it’s one of those passages from the Bible where the narrative is rather bland or straightforward and doesn’t express the hugeness of what happens—‘cause what happens here is huge, like really huge, like, as huge as the cathedral of Notre Dame (which, some argue, wouldn’t exist without this passage right here). But we’ll get into that in a second.

Paul and company begin their journey to Macedonia by making the journey from Troas to Samothrace, which was an independent island later absorbed into the Roman empire. From there, they travel to Neapolis. Neapolis is not just some random town. It is the port of Philippi and it became the port as the result of conquest.

See, Macedonia is the homeland of such infamous figures as Philip the Second and his son Alexander (the Great) and Aristotle. Philip and Alexander were men of conquest who extended the territory of their great cities by tacking on new lands. (Side note: what’s with these ancient guys naming cities after themselves? Philip 2 names a city after himself, Alexander names like 20 cities after himself. Is it a rule that conquest is the opposite of imagination?) Neapolis is the port, the gateway to Philippi, to Macedonia, and by extension, to Europe. Once they pass through the port, Paul and company enter Philippi. Why Luke deems it necessary to say that it’s a “leading city” and a “Roman colony” might seem relatively pedantic, but it actually tells us a lot.

Acts began in Palestine. It spread to Syria, to Turkey, to Lebanon and Jordan, and beyond. It’s that beyond that’s so important. Not only is Christianity spreading among various social groups, it is spreading across the known world. So, while Paul is still in Roman territory, he is no longer in remotely the same cultural environment. Given that these Christian missionaries are in the cosmopolitan urban center of Macedonia, they decide to linger awhile.

Philippi, like most ancient cities of the Mediterranean, was a city with gates. The purpose of these gates was to provide both protection and organization. The gate is the entrance, the door, both a part of the wall and nothing like it. When we see gates mentioned in scripture, we might do well to think about what a gate signifies. Gates are liminal spaces. They are in-between inside and outside, protection and vulnerability. They mark porous places along the borders. Paul goes to this space. He goes to the border, to the liminal space between the world and the city, thinking that there might be a place of prayer there. Women had gathered in this space and, rather than ignoring them, Paul talks to them.

Praying down by the river at the gates of a city that may or may not have been hospitable to Jewish persons—including that strange sect of Jewish religious practice known as Christianity—Paul and company find Lydia. Some scholars speculate that she was a proselyte, a person of religious devotion though not a Jewish or Christian convert. What we do know of Lydia is that she is not from Philippi. She is from Thyatira, a city not too distant from the very place Paul’s team had just departed. She is a marginal person from the start, in a marginal place—the gates. But Lydia is also apparently the head of her household and an economically independent woman. Hearing Paul’s message, she opens her heart to God and her home to Paul and his missionary team. This is the first documented conversion in Europe.

Western Europe often takes its origin to be that of Ancient Greece. Greek culture and values were what the Romans draped themselves in as they began their conquest of the Mediterranean, including the Ancient Middle East. Many of the commentaries I saw praised this passage as the advent of Christianity in Europe, out of which spun cathedrals like Notre Dame, Michelangelo’s “Pieta,” and the Book of Common Prayer. But out of this also spun the Crusades and the Inquisition and colonialism. It can be hard for a devout Christian white person from the Midwest to get excited about Christianity in Europe when it is tied to a history with such conquest, military action, and elitism. But Lydia offers us a different example.

Here at the gates of Philippi, Lydia opens her heart to God and makes her first Christian act that of hospitality. Hospitality—more than just St. Paul’s Wi-Fi password—is appropriate as a first Christian act. It is an act of throwing open the gates to the city, of welcoming in those strangers from Palestine with their message of a crucified Jewish carpenter who is also God. It is also fitting that this act is done by a woman who is herself a stranger in a strange land, who has become the head of a household, and who brings everyone in that household into the kingdom of God through baptism.

Paul and company are brought into the city, into what will become Europe, by an act of hospitality. They came with expectations of a synagogue and powerful men to talk with and ended up as Lydia’s guests. Turns out even in one of those dens of scum and villainy, one of those bastions of empire, God’s word of peace can not only be found, but can grow.

As if on purpose, our lectionary reading gives us another vision to complement the one Paul received. This vision, however, provides us with many more details.

The vision the writer of Revelation sees is one of the holy city of Jerusalem coming down from heaven—only it’s a **new** Jerusalem. It has no temple **in** the city, for the temple is God. It will be a light to the nations, replacing the need for sunlight. And most importantly, the gates are always open. It is a city always open to those who wish to enter it. It fears no external threat but transforms the very idea of a border wall into that of a door, a door that leads to the very throne of God and the Lamb.

This vision is not a blueprint for creating an earthly utopia, but it is also not just an unattainable eschatological vision. I think that we can envision the heavenly city, the city of God, as Augustine would say, as a possibility always present in our own cities...even in our “city” of Greenville. This city of God is not necessarily a totally new place to live dropping from the sky

like Sekovia. (You know, Sekovia, that fictional Slavic wonderland which featured so prominently in “Avengers: Age of Ultron.”) The city of God might be like that, but I find it more challenging to think of it as a latent possibility hiding in plain sight within our own cities of men and women.

A city with gates that are always open is a challenge to our own understanding of who gets allowed into our own spaces. Do we let in refugees even if they are not of the same faith as us? Do we let in people who want to make America great again or who want to provide universal healthcare and charge rich people lots of money? Do we let in the ugly? Ex-convicts? People on the NSA watchlist? People who think Starbucks serves coffee? Illinois politicians?

See, this vision of a city whose center and light is God challenges our preconceptions about who gets in and who doesn't. It's a vision that doesn't tell us to bring our liturgies and our old-timey songs to the godless heathens who live in subsidized housing, or our pop songs to Jesus and our cool fonts to the urban Jamba Juice-istas. It is a vision of a complete city, of a city that is possible from within the world we see here and now—a city where the gates are always open—a city open to us.