

## A Change of Itinerary – Brian Hartley

Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 5:1-9

One of my favorite activities is the planning of a family vacation. Mind you, these days we don't take them as often as we used to when the girls were younger and lived at home with us. In those days, when time was short and money was tighter, making sure we got maximum "bang for the buck" was absolutely essential. So, for instance, when we flew to Seattle in the summer of 2000, I figured that since we were going so far west we needed to take in as much as possible. So it was that I meticulously put together a ten-day adventure that took us not just to Seattle, but to Portland, Vancouver, Victoria, via the Columbia River, various and sundry ferries, a jaunt into the British Columbia wilderness and even the more arid eastern part of Washington. In order to accomplish this, every minute had to be scheduled, every penny accounted for, and reservations secured well ahead of time.

My family somehow put up with my anal-retentive approach to discovering vacation bliss but they have never let me forget how exhausting it all was. I doubt that I would have remained as cool and collected as the Apostle Paul in Acts 16 who wound up in Philippi only because he had been forbidden entry into Bithynia. In fact, the story as it is told in the verses just preceding today's opening lesson is one of doors slammed shut and continual frustration for the apostle to the Gentiles. Having just come away from the infamous Apostolic Council in Jerusalem where he had received official permission to continue his ministry to Gentiles, he found himself losing his travelling companion, Barnabas, in a tiff over the head-strong Timothy and then confronted with continuing issues whenever he tried to follow his prescribed itinerary. Finally, according to the text, he has this rather strange dream of a man from Macedonia who asks for help. From this point on, Paul's willingness to change his itinerary will not only make a difference in his ministry but will impact, I would like to suggest, all of Christian history.

First, Paul crosses the Aegean from Troas to the island of Samothrace, to the port city of Neapolis, to the Roman colony at Philippi. Though this may not seem much different from many of Paul's other travel narratives, we should note that this marks the point at which the gospel officially moves from Asia to Europe. Grammatically, this shift is all too apparent in the text as we move from third-person to first-person narrative, but historically the shift is even more important. In short, without this hop-skip-and-a-jump, those of us who are descendants of European immigrants might very well not even be Christians today.

Second, there is a curious shift in missiological strategy in our passage that often goes unnoticed by preachers. Up until this time, Paul's approach has been to go looking for the synagogue on the Sabbath as a springboard for Christian evangelism. But, remember, that the narrative suggests that he is coming fresh from the Apostolic Council back in Jerusalem where, with a few provisional agreements, he has been "released for denominational service" outside of

the Jewish community. So, whether it is the fact that Philippi simply doesn't have a synagogue or because Paul is intentionally changing his approach, on this particular Sabbath the text says, "we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer," (Acts 16:13). In all the previous accounts of Paul's ministry he has gone to the synagogue, but this day he finds himself at the proseuke. Instead of joining his brother Jews in a house of worship, he finds himself perhaps out in the open air "outside the city gates." Now, later in the sermon I want to come back to this description of ministry near the city gate, but for now it is important that we simply be aware that there is this second "sea change" afoot as he not only moves outside of his planned itinerary in Asia Minor into Europe, but moves, as well, from the synagogue to a place of gathering near the entrance to the city of Philippi.

And this then leads us to a third interesting shift. Had he gone to a synagogue, he would have been seated, no doubt, on the "male side" with a bunch of bearded guys who smelled of testosterone. But, here in Philippi, he must do the unthinkable as a Jewish man and begin a conversation with a group of women. In an article written almost forty years ago now in the British periodical, *The Expository Times*, Derek Thomas suggested that this initial contact with Lydia "points to a new status for women, a new estimate of the value and place of woman in the purpose of God," ("The Place of Women in the Church at Philippi," 118). While I think that perhaps the Rev. Thomas waxes a bit overly hyperbolic here, it is the case that women played a key role in the leadership of the early church as is made clear by the numerous references throughout the Pauline literature.

But women seemed to have been absolutely front and center in the church in Philippi. In fact two of them, Euodia and Syntyche, seemed to have undergone something of a falling out that spilled over into the larger church body. While Paul never discloses the nature of their disagreement, that he includes a personal appeal in a letter sent to the entire church suggests that this went beyond a mere difference of opinion. In fact, the majority of scholars believe that this may well suggest that these two women were openly expressing their views in the church and because they were probably in positions of leadership it may have had a deleterious effect on the larger congregation.

Now, all of this is well and good, providing interesting little insights into our opening text, but what of the larger context in which we find ourselves on this Sixth Sunday of Easter as we prepare for the Ascension of Christ in a few days and the celebration of Pentecost, or Whitsunday, which is yet to follow? I would like to suggest that the travel itinerary from the book of the Acts of the Apostles is something of a miniature of the radical healing or therapeutics which lies behind all of today's readings. For, if you look closely at the texts which follow from both the Revelation of the Elder John and the narrative with which we are provided in John's gospel, we are confronted with pictures of healing and redemption—both of which take place near the city gates.

In the case of the former, it is a vision of great hope. But much of the imagery we get in the Bible is quite pastoral—that is, we are used to hearing of green swards, rustic shepherds, and

the clean smell of the great outdoors. But this vision, this dream, which captures the imagination is set in a city. And the curious thing is that normally one would look for an element of health and redemption in the precincts of the synagogue, or temple. But notice what the writer says: “I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb,” (Rev. 21:22). And, then, just a few short verses later we hear of this great heavenly city, that “its gates will never be shut by day,” (Rev. 21:25). This is a place of vast hospitality where fear is not the order of the day but openness which involves vulnerability to all that many might consider “diseased”—since disease is what is classically defined as that which comes from outside and infects the body.

And then in the latter gospel lesson, we find Jesus heading into this very earthly city on the first of several journeys at holiday time. In this respect, John’s gospel is quite different from the other three Synoptic Gospels. For in them, Jesus only goes once to Jerusalem and that is to die. But in this gospel, Jesus is seen striding into the holy city on several different festive occasions. And this time, we are told he finds himself at the Sheep Gate near the pool of Bethesda—an area which many of our students know has recently undergone archaeological preservation. Here, we encounter a diseased man—one of many invalids afflicted with blindness, lameness, or paralysis. As on many occasions, Jesus brings healing to one considered ritually unclean. But what is fascinating about this story is the note on which it ends—a line which we might easily overlook. The gospel writer says simply, “Now that day was a Sabbath,” (John 5:9). Again, the gospel challenges traditional ways of thinking about boundaries between sacred and secular. Just as the gospel has come to the pagan culture of Philippi and to a gender considered second-class, or just as the gates have been left open and no temple necessary in the heavenly city, here Jesus is not in the synagogue as one would expect but at the city gates on the Sabbath healing one who would have been considered ritually unclean. What are we to make of all of this boundary-crossing in three different narratives?

At the heart of the Easter season there stands this curious element of surprise—from Mary waiting outside the tomb, to the disciples on the Emmaus road, to Jesus showing up for a fish breakfast with the disciples. For those of us old enough to remember his voice, in the words of Private Gomer Pyle, the message of Easter is, “Surprise! Surprise! Surprise!” And yet, every year we fail to be surprised by the return of spring, by the next bend in the road, or by the sheer wonder of the sacraments discovered in the mundane as my new friend, Dean Nelson, points out in his book, *God Hides in Plain Sight*. And, we bring that same failure to pay attention to these familiar texts of scripture so often that we forget that the element of surprise is at the very heart of inductive Bible study.

Perhaps what we need is a change of itinerary—something like that which the apostle Paul experienced in today’s text. But this begins, not by seeing the difficulties in life as God not paying attention to us, but by seeing such times as opportunities to be confronted by a new way of seeing our world and taking a road we had perhaps never thought of before. Like those living in the first century, we may have become accustomed to looking for God in only certain places

or in only certain ways. But perhaps God wants to take us out of the church building to the city gates or even, heaven forbid, open the very gates of the city to those whom we have marginalized. What might that look like? Where might such a thing happen?

I want to tell you about a couple of alums from our department who have forced me to rethink my itinerary. Because some of what I want to share is somewhat sensitive, I have chosen not to reveal their real names lest it be embarrassing to them. So, for the sake of today's narrative I'll simply call them Moe, Larry, and Curly. These three guys all came to our department a number of years back and were somewhat nondescript. They were, like many of my students, fun-loving, somewhat carefree guys. They had their passions—most of which, I came to believe, were outside the classroom, though their love for Jesus was apparent to anyone who knew them. They enjoyed sparring with Dr. McPeak and myself, but I have to confess, I wasn't sure if any of them would make a big impact on the world because they were "C-level" students who sat in the middle or at the back of the class and didn't seem to get fired up about spending the evening reading in the library the way I do.

Over the years we have remained in casual contact. And they each have gone their separate ways, all of them eventually getting married. So, I was somewhat surprised to hear a few years ago that two of them had come together to plant a church. They were absolutely convinced that this was what God wanted them to do and they were willing to put their lives on the line for this venture of faith. When they came by to tell me about it, I have to admit that I thought they were a little bit crazy. They told me how they wanted this to be a "safe place" for people and an open space situated near the "city gates" where they lived. They didn't want to invest a bunch of money in an expensive building, they just wanted to find some space they could rent where they could share the gospel narrative and help people discover Jesus in their everyday lives.

And you know what, that is just what they did. Recently I had occasion to see some of the work they put in to make this church happen. In fact, one of the guys who participated in that new church plant is now a student of mine. And when I watched Curly preach, I sat back in awe at how he took a text from one of Paul's epistles and made it come alive for a group of people who sat on the edge of their chairs. Were these the same guys who stayed up at night playing video games and fell asleep in my class because of my boring lectures? Were these the guys that I had written off as accumulating too much debt without spending enough time in the library? What had happened to my assumptions that these guys would not leave a mark on the world?

To say that I was surprised would be to put it mildly. I had mistakenly plotted out an itinerary for these students and had been trying to send them to ministry amongst a bunch of Jews when they had been called to a place down by the river. I had all of the costs worked out, but these fellows decided to be more like Jesus and not count the cost. So, this morning, as we prepare for the Ascension of our Lord, comes these gentle reminders that the resurrected Jesus is not to be held onto and touched in our houses of worship but to be discovered outside our doors, perhaps even outside our carefully-drawn boundaries. And maybe next time I need to learn to just get into the car and drive wherever the wind might take Darlene and me. (Well, at least I'll

think about it.) But even more importantly, I invite you to join me in seeing God's purposes for the redemption of all of creation in each and every person and in each and every place. And, in so doing, our hearts may yet be ready to get just a glimpse of what a change in itinerary can do when we celebrate the birthday of the church on Pentecost. It is to this open-ended journey that God invites us this morning.