

Sermon, May 12, 2024, Journey's with the Early Church - The Spirit at Work Opening
Hearts

Today our theme is the Spirit at Work, Opening Hearts. When I read today's scripture, one of the first things I noticed, was the Spirit bringing two groups of people to the river to pray - Paul and his companions, and Lydia and her companions. The song "As I Went Down to the River to Pray," kept running through my mind. So, I wrote a verse from the perspective of Paul and his companions, and a verse from the perspective of Lydia and her companions.

Then on one of my walks, when I was thinking about this, the thought came to me that most of us would come down toward the river to pray this morning. So, I wrote a verse from our perspective as well. I will sing the verses and invite you to join me, in singing the chorus following each verse, using the words, "Oh people, let's go down."

First about Paul & his Companions

The Lord led us down to the river to pray.
We met some women there that day.
They were open to what the Spirit had us to say.
O Lord, help us show them the way.
O people let's go down, let's go down, come on down
O people let's go down, down to the river to pray.

Now for Lydia and her companions

As we went down to the river to pray
As we did each Sabbath day
We listened to what a guest had to say.
O Lord, **he** showed us the way.
O people let's go down, let's go down, come on down
O people let's go down, down to the river to pray.

And now for ourselves.

As we came down **toward the river to pray**
As we do each Sabbath day
We want to hear what the Spirit has to say.
O Lord, show us the way. Invitation Gesture
O people let's go down, let's go down, come on down
O people let's go down, down to the river to pray.

As I continued to read today's story and the chapters around it, I tried to imagine how Lydia might describe her thoughts and feelings as the Spirit of Jesus led her and others

to begin the church in Philippi. Then I imagined inviting her here this morning, to share her experience with us. (Put on purple scarf)

Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to share my story with you. My name is Lydia. I am a Greek woman from Thyatira, in Macedonia. Thyatira was known far and wide for its special, colour-fast, purple dye. Purple was a symbol of prestige because to produce dye of this "royal" color, people had to collect and smash sea snails for their juices. Only the rich could afford cloth made from this dye.

I moved to the city of Philippi about 300 miles from Thyatira and became a successful businesswoman. I imported and sold these luxury purple textiles from my hometown. While this would have been unusual for women in some cultures, it was quite normal in mine.

While Philippi was the center of worship of a variety of gods, I wasn't satisfied worshipping one of them as most of my fellow citizens were. I had learned about the God of Israel, the one true God – who was powerful enough to part the sea yet tender enough to yearn for the love of his people. Every Sabbath, I took time out of my busy schedule, to go down to the river outside of the city gates to pray and worship with the Jewish women who met there.

One Sabbath, some men visited our worship service. One of them, a man named Paul, told us that God had given him a vision, to come and share the good news about the Kingdom of God with us. He offered to lead worship and began by praying the familiar words: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." Paul surprised us by adding. "And love your neighbour as yourself."

A bigger surprise was when he said that phrase came from a man named Jesus, who was the long-awaited Messiah, the son of God! Paul told us that Jesus had spent three years travelling from place to place, talking about the Kingdom of God, and demonstrating the love of God. And the biggest surprise was that God had raised Jesus from the dead 3 days after he was crucified for disrupting the status quo.

I particularly liked the story about Easter morning. A woman named Mary went to his tomb to tend to his body and found the tomb empty. She saw someone who she thought was a gardener and asked where they had taken the body of Jesus. It turned out it was Jesus she was talking to, but she didn't recognize him. I wondered, why didn't she recognize him? Did she not really look at him? Was it because he did not look like she expected?

It wasn't until Jesus called her by name that she recognized him. She immediately tried to hold on to him, but Jesus asked her to let go and go and tell his other disciples that he had risen from the dead. For some reason the words, "let go" and "go and tell" kept running through my mind.

Paul also shared his own story with us. He said that he was a Greek speaking Jew, who felt strongly that the followers of Jesus were troublemakers. They didn't respect all the Jewish laws and customs e.g. not working on the sabbath and not associating with Gentiles. Paul hated followers of Jesus so much that he began going from house to house in Jerusalem dragging male and female followers of Jesus, off to prison.

One day as he was travelling from Jerusalem to Damascus to look for more followers of Jesus to arrest, his life was turned upside down. Jesus appeared to him in a bright light that blinded him, called him by his Jewish name "Saul," and asked him: "Why are you persecuting me?"

To make a long story short, The Spirit of Jesus told Saul to go into the city, and he would be told what to do. With the help of his fellow travellers, blind Saul went into Damascus, and spent 3 long days without eating or drinking. He prayed and waited for instructions.

In a vision, the Lord told Ananias, a follower of Jesus in Damascus, to visit Saul and place his hands on him to restore his sight. He was also to tell Saul that the Lord had chosen Saul to go and tell the good news of Jesus to Jews and Gentiles and he would suffer for doing so.

Ananias, who had heard reports of what Saul was doing in Jerusalem, hesitated because he was afraid of Saul. Eventually he went to Saul, laid his hands on him, and shared the messages from the Spirit. Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he could see again! He got up and was baptized as a follower of Jesus.

Saul immediately went into the synagogues and shared his experience. Many people were amazed to see how he had changed. Now he went from town to town – not to hunt down believers to take to jail but rather to encourage them. He also told non-believers about the Kingdom of God and God's love. Though he ended up in jail a number of times, that did not stop him from talking about Jesus.

As I listened to Paul, I noticed that he and Mary had things in common. Jesus, called both by name and they both had to "let go" of something. Paul had to let go of his view of Jesus as a troublemaker. Mary had to let go of wanting things to go back the way

they were before Jesus had died. Paul was to go and tell the Jews and Gentiles about Jesus. Mary was to go and tell the other disciples that Jesus had risen!

As I listened to Paul, I felt the Spirit of the Lord open my heart to believe in the Good News that Jesus loves me. It was as if Jesus was surrounding me in love and calling me by name. I wondered; might Jesus be asking me to let go of something too?

As I thought about my life, and what I had learned about Jesus, I wondered if the Spirit might be inviting me to let go of how I viewed myself and my wealth. Oh, I didn't consider myself particularly wealthy, as most of the people I dealt with, were wealthier than me. But then realized I was comparing myself only to those that had more than me rather than those that had less than me. Maybe I needed to "let go" of comparing myself to others period.

As I thought about my possessions, I was surprised to realize that God had really given me everything I had. For example, the circumstances I had been born into, the many opportunities because of them, and my abilities to have a successful business. They were all gifts from God. And I had to admit that I had a lot more than I needed to meet my needs. Maybe, God was inviting me to let go of thinking that because I worked hard, and had made smart financial decisions, I deserved everything I had. Maybe, God was inviting me to use what I had for the Kingdom of God rather than just myself. Might this be part of what loving my neighbour as myself meant?

Next, I wondered if God was inviting me to go and tell others about the Kingdom of God and God's love. People I thought of included my family, my friends, my servants, my neighbours, my customers, and other people I interacted with in my daily life. I wondered if others might be able to tell from how I acted or from what I said that God loves them too?

While I didn't have answers to all my many questions, I knew I wanted to say "yes" to God's love. I asked to be baptized that day with some others, as I wanted to let people know I had decided to be a follower of Jesus.

I was so full of joy! I knew I wanted to share what God had entrusted to me. The first way I thought of doing this was to host Paul & his companions in my home, while they were visiting in Philippi.

Paul & his companions hesitated at first, as they were concerned that hosting foreign men in my home could cause a scandal. But this was a risk I was willing to take. A side

benefit for me was that I, my family, and friends would have more time to learn from them about the Kingdom of God.

Next, I realized that I had enough space in my home to host our church meetings. When I extended this invitation there was concern that hosting meetings, where a new Jewish messiah was worshipped, could ruin my reputation and business. But again, I insisted.

When Paul and Silas were dragged into the marketplace, flogged, and put into jail as disrupters of the peace, our church prayed for their safety. We were able to visit them regularly and tend to their needs.

When Paul & Silas were released from jail they came back to my house for a few days, before travelling on. I did lose a few customers because of my association with them, but that was a small price to pay for all that I had been given.

In addition to financially supporting our church in Philippi, the Spirit also encouraged me to provide financial support to Paul for his missionary journeys and for new church plants.

One thing I realized early on, was that saying “yes” to God’s love for me and loving others as myself, was not a one-time thing, but ongoing. I felt called to daily ask myself some questions. The first, “What did God ask me to let go of today? Was it to let go of hate like Paul or wanting to live in the past like Mary? Was it to let go of some of my possessions, or money? Was it to let go of things like anger, prejudice, fear or letting go of thinking my way of doing things or my viewpoint is the only right one.” Another question was: “What opportunities did I have to show or tell others about the Kingdom of God and that God loves them?”

When I shared what I was doing with others in our church, some others decided to join me in asking these questions. We began sharing our experiences with each other. This helped us to be accountable for the spirit’s work in our lives and helped all of us grow as followers of Jesus.

Someone suggested that we might ask similar questions of our church. “What is God asking us to let go of as a church? Who is God inviting us to show or tell about the Kingdom of God?” This too has been a growing experience for our church.

Years later Paul sent a letter to our church in Philippi, thanking God for our help in spreading the good news from the first day we heard it. I am so glad that I had said “yes” to the Spirit’s invitations to be a part of the church at Philippi.

I will close with a favourite prayer of mine.

Oh God, you are my God and I seek you.
My soul thirsts for you, My flesh faints for you
As in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
I have seen your glory and your steadfast love,
Poured over my life, my lips sing your praises.
I will bless you as long as I live,
With the breath you have given me, the words that I utter.
And the work of my mind and hands
And all the gifts you have given me, I give back to you.
So that all may sit in the shadow of your wings
And share the joy of your salvation.

Thank you for listening to my story. May each of you continue to allow the Spirit of Jesus to work in you and through you.