

“Resurrection Vision: Discerning God’s Lead”

Acts 16:9-15/John 14:26-27

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I remember some years ago when we were visiting my wife Joyce’s uncle and aunt on their farm. They had a small three-legged dog that liked to roam a bit. So to restrict his movements—and you’d be surprised at how fast he could move—they bought one of those invisible fences. A wire boundary was concealed underground and every time the dog got within five feet of it he would hear a blast of sound from his collar—but if the dog continued to the boundary—“zap”! I was amazed at how that dog had learned exactly where the invisible boundaries were and stayed completely within them.

All of us have some invisible boundaries embedded into our lives that dictate our movements and define our limits. And COVID has only confined us more. We often develop this comfort zone—where things are tried and true, known and familiar; and we stick within it. Whether it’s shopping at the same grocery store, walking on the same path, or mixing with the same people, we are creatures of habit—and often hesitant to move beyond that.

Yet as we move farther into the book of Acts what is being called to our attention is the Holy Spirit’s continual desire to move us out **beyond** the invisible barriers to new paths, new people and new places—towards a greater effectiveness in life and in spreading the Gospel. Luke, the writer of Acts, keeps reinforcing his central theme of the expansion of the church beyond every old barrier and boundary into the whole world—even when obstacles arise. When two of the leading missionaries quarrel about the inclusion of John Mark—rather than it destroying the fledgling movement, the Spirit simply creates two missionary thrusts outward to the gentiles—effectively doubling the church’s mission. Nothing, including human limitations, can stop the movement of the Spirit who leads beyond old boundary lines and limits. It happens again here in today’s passage.

As soon as the Jerusalem conference of the fledgling church is over—where the barrier to admitting Gentiles has been overcome together—Paul and his associates make their way into Asia Minor with the intention of developing a new work within what’s modern day Turkey. This is familiar ground for Paul and Timothy who are both from there. Yet during their weeks of walking and wondering, praying and waiting—surprisingly, they sense that their mission there is blocked; and that the Holy Spirit actually has something else in mind. Then one night Paul receives a vision of a Macedonian man pleading, saying “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Again the Holy Spirit prods these early Apostles beyond familiar old engrained boundaries into brand new territory—crossing one of the great frontiers of the ancient world and for the first time breaking new missionary ground in Europe. Having transcended ethnic limits, the new movement is now crossing a significant geographical and cultural boundary.

Paul is out of his element here in this Roman city of Philippi that stood on a strategic east-west trade route in northern Greece. Its strong connections with Rome

meant the place was deeply identified with explicitly foreign Roman values and power. Usually Paul's missionary approach was to go to the local synagogue and to talk with local Jews about the Gospel. However, there was no synagogue in Philippi—probably because there were so few Jews. Instead, Paul discovers an informal place of prayer outside of the city by the river where a group of women are gathered. And crossing this ancient male/female divide Paul meets Lydia, a business woman in her own right and a person of considerable means. This casual conversation by the river leads to the conversion and baptism of this wealthy woman and her household who then offer a new base of operations for Paul and his missionary endeavours. Old boundaries of sex and class fall away as Paul welcomes her as a sister in Christ. The Holy Spirit dramatically directs the movement of the mission outward beyond old limits.

On the one side of this new faith enterprise is the role of human calculation: Paul, Silas and Timothy first opt to stay within those tried and true familiar limits. Yet on the other side of this faith enterprise is a divine guidance that then blocks their way. And just as Peter was drawn to the edge of Palestine before being shown that he was to preach to gentiles, so here Paul is given a vision of a “certain Macedonian man” who pleads with him for help across old familiar boundaries in new and unfamiliar Europe.

What invisible boundaries and barriers might God be calling us beyond—in our personal lives, in our congregational life—so that we can share Gospel with new people, in new places? Across race, language, sex, geography—across the street or across the aisle—who is the Spirit leading you to? Acts shows us is that the Spirit is already working and speaking to deconstruct old limiting boundaries that divide. And when we are available to listen for the Spirit's leading, and are prepared to yield in humility to that lead—there is always a chance for new life. I'm sure most of us have experienced that nudging or prodding of the Spirit that asked us to call someone or drop by to see them. And when we did yield to that voice and reach out—we often discovered that we had called at just the time when that call was needed most. An evangelism course that I took some years ago required that each of us pray intentionally each day for opportunities to connect with new people in conversations about faith. What I discovered was that the more I prayed for openings—the more that the Spirit would spontaneously bring them about.

Yet we have to work intentionally to live with a listening, discerning heart. Our lives are filled with so much noise and busyness. Rushed and hectic lives put us at risk of becoming spiritually insensitive and out of tune with the Spirit's lead. As we seek to serve ourselves more than God, our communion with God becomes increasingly shallow. Deeply engrained in us is our desire to run things our way. Pride and unhealthy ego deafen us to God's voice and leading.

Counter-culturally, most of the writers of the Bible tell us that real life and joy are not to be found in **ME** getting what I want, but are to be found in me seeking what God wants, in the company of others in a community of faith—just as Paul, Silas and Timothy did here in Acts. Foremost for God's people is desiring God's voice and lead, and then being willing to move intentionally in that direction—even beyond our comfort zone. The voice of God is very gentle; we cannot hear it if we let other voices compete. There

needs to be time for quiet and to listen. To live with a discerning heart is to believe, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning expressed it, that “earth’s crammed with heaven” and that God is everywhere to be found in the holy ground of our everyday existence speaking to us and leading us.

To be a listening, discerning person is to imitate the response of Abraham who heard the divine guidance to change the course of his life. Out of obedience and undaunted by old age, he left the familiarity of family and homeland and proceeded into the unknown—trusting in God’s promise of a blessed future. To be a discerning person is to emulate the example of Mary when the angel Gabriel announced a dramatic turning point in her life. Hearing the call of God, Mary understood the challenge before her: to give up her own plans for her future and to say a willing “Yes” to her part in God’s plan—“to let go and to let God.” Abraham and Mary were both able to hear God’s guidance that announced a major move beyond old boundaries. Nurturing a desire and openness to listen for God’s voice and lead is the place to start.

Jeff, was an elder when I served at Kings Church in Nova Scotia. One evening, all of a sudden he had this sense that he should drive to Lumsden’s Pond—a park with a lake that was about 30 minutes from his home. He told his wife Julie that he was going, but he couldn’t really explain why. A half an hour later Jeff pulled into the parking lot of the park at dusk. He turned off the head lights. As the quiet settled in and his eyes adjusted to the growing darkness—he suddenly noticed something floating in the lake. It was a person who was attempting suicide—much longer and that person would have drowned. But because Jeff was listening, and available to the Spirit’s voice and leading, God was able to do a new thing that night!

Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). What invisible boundaries and barriers is God leading us beyond—in our personal lives, in our congregational life—so that we can be Good News to new people, in new places. The Spirit is already at work opening new opportunities if we will simply ask to be open to be led.