

Making Second First

Text: Acts 16: 6-15

Rev. Dr. C. Geordie Campbell

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A nugget of truth, a dilemma that intersects every life, and some questions to send us home. God willing these thoughts will find a place in our hearts this morning.

The nugget of truth is pure gold and comes from the book of Acts. It's hidden in a slice of scripture often skimmed over or even ignored because it's filled with geographical reference points that can be tricky to pronounce – exactly the kind of passage that most of us don't want to get stuck with when it's our turn to read.

Consider these words from the launching days of the early church. "Paul and his entourage traveled through the region of Phrygia and Galatia . . . and when they came opposite Mysia they attempted to go to Bithynia . . . but the spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So they went down to Troas where Paul had a vision of a man pleading with him saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' So they set out from Troas to Samothrace, then to Neapolis, and finally to the leading city in the district of Macedonia called Philippi."

If you trace the geography of these oddly named places it all boils down to this: Paul set out for Bithynia and ended up in Macedonia. To give you a GPS equivalent, that's nearly a 2,000-mile shift in itinerary¹ – something akin to saying, "I was heading for Denver but ended up in Schenectady!"

Driving the point even deeper is to remember that Paul was a hyper-strategic man. He was never half-witted in his pursuits. But, still, his initial intentions were thwarted. First blocked by one thing and then diverted by another he ended up crossing the Aegean Sea and landing on the Macedonian shores of Greece. It's a pretty amazing story!

But let's not stop the telling quite yet. Because shortly after Paul got to Philippi he met a woman named Lydia. She heard him preaching about Jesus by a river. God opened her heart and she became a believer. Paul baptized her then and there and she became the first European convert to Christianity as the gospel crossed over to an entirely new continent.

I wonder, can you see? The story is about detours and second choices and making the most of where life delivers us. And in fact, the accidental journey of Paul to Philippi lifts up a dilemma and a promise that intersects all of us.

Life doesn't usually happen exactly as we plan. We don't always get our chosen lot. Twists and turns and unexpected events get in the way or dissuade us. Changes in family, or in work, or in the world at large. But in the midst of this very predictable human reality, faithful life occurs by doing precisely as Paul did. He made the most of second best by letting second become first.

I've been reading Krista Tippett's new book, Becoming Wise. She is the host of NPR's "On Being" broadcast. Her words: "Most things in life don't go as we imagine. Still, the redemptive truth is that we are made by what would break us. We only learn to walk when we risk falling down. I have heard endless variations on this theme: the battle with illness that saves the life that follows; the childhood pain that leads to vocation; the disability that opens into wholeness and a presence to the hidden wholeness of others. Learning this is the beginning of wisdom."²

Here's the same truth through another biography and closer to our time. Sometimes it's easiest to see the larger picture when it is embodied in flesh and bone.

Harry had a dream from his earliest days that he wanted to be a teacher – as his father was before him. That was his chosen course in life, his dream, his Bithynia. So when the time came he went to the University. But during his second year his father was taken ill and Harry had to leave school to provide for his care. Though he recovered and Harry went back to school, before long his mother was also taken ill and died.

The stress of it all led Harry to a nervous breakdown and he found himself in a place he never dreamed he would be – a sanitarium. He fell deep into the darkness of depression. Surely it was the end of being a teacher. But in the midst of that dark and confusing time something unexpected happened. He found the light of faith emerging, an extraordinary faith that was born of his struggle.

That unexpected, unplanned detour led Harry Emerson Fosdick to become one of the great teachers and preachers of the twentieth century.³ His insight and wisdom provided in no small measure the foundation to the progressive Protestant foundation beneath us. He became the founding pastor of the famed Riverside Church, right on the edge of Union Seminary where he became a revered and esteemed member of Union's unparalleled faculty.

His own words say it best: "Rare is the person who lives their whole life on the basis of their chosen dream. The key to faithful life comes not in waiting for the perfect to come, but in making the most of what is given at any time."⁴

Let me put the matter right here. Because the deepest truth of the Bible, such as this archetypal dilemma from Paul's journey, comes home fullest and best only when we also look at ourselves. So let me ask a few questions to send us into the week that awaits.

Can you see how the conundrum of Paul, that of missing what you considered first choice only to discover that life's second best is really where you were meant to be?

Is there a way that your Bithynia has not materialized; and yet, somehow, by grace and grit you have found yourself fulfilled in an unexpected Macedonia doing some pretty darn good things?

Can you fathom that even when you might end up where you never thought you would find yourself, God can yet use you for the good of the gospel?

Have you discovered that one of the keys to fruitful life is to grow where you are planted; to look around, to be where you are, to acknowledge your surprise, and then to give your best genuinely, authentically, daily?

Dr. Fosdick again: "Rare is the person who lives on the basis of their chosen dream. The key is not in waiting for the perfect to come, but in making the most of what is given at any time."

All of this I ask today, and place in your hands . . . the nugget of Paul's truth, the dilemma to which he points, the story of Harry, and this pocketful of questions.

And I do so in the name of the One who never planned to be nailed to a cross, and yet who turned that unexpected destination into the promise of life abundant and life eternal – for you and for me and for all of us. Amen.

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First Church
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107

¹ William Willimon. Interpretation: Acts. John Knox Press, 1988, p. 134.

² Krista Tippett. Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living. Penguin Press, 2016, pp. 13-14.

³ For the full story, see: Harry Emerson Fosdick. The Living of These Days. Harper and Row, 1956.

⁴ Harry Emerson Fosdick. The Hope of the World. Harper and Row, 1933, pp. 69-77.