

St. Peter Lutheran Church + Modesto, California

Work While It Is Day
Stewardship Series
May 5, AD 2002

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Acts 16:6-15

6 Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. 7 When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. 8 So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. 9 During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

11 From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. 12 From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days. 13 On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. 14 One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. 15 When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us. (NIV)

“Help Us!” - A Cry for the Gospel

Here is your mission, should you choose to accept it: You and a partner will be provided with a used recreational vehicle. You will be given some basic supplies and a small budget. You, your vehicle and supplies will be placed on a ship that will carry you across the Atlantic Ocean to the coast of Africa. You will disembark with your vehicle and begin, well, driving around the continent of Africa. You will have to work with local governments (whatever form those may take in the African bush) and try to communicate with indigenous people. Your goal is to find a place to begin a new Christian mission field. The offerings of thousands of people will be invested in the location you choose. Preachers will be sent. Perhaps a medical mission will begin. All you have to do is drive around Africa and find where to send them.

Would you accept a mission like that? Two men did in 1949. Pastor Edgar Hoenecke and Pastor Arthur Wacker made a transatlantic trip with a used RV and drove around Africa. Their adventures ranged from the comical to the life threatening. They ran into many obstacles in their long journey. But finally, at the hook of the Kafue River in what was Northern Rhodesia, they were welcomed. A new WELS mission field was begun. Some

fifty three years later, do you know how many people are now part of the Lutheran Church of Central Africa? I'll spell it out for you: 4...0...0...0...0. 40,000 souls are now members, having been brought to faith in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, who used the gospel those two men and many more like them brought. And behind the preaching of the gospel were the offerings and prayers of people like you and me.

In Acts chapter 16 we hear about a mission journey. This one was made by Paul the Apostle and some associates. They too ran into obstacles, some of which God planted in front of them. But God also blessed their efforts, and those efforts bore results.

What does this have to do with us? A lot. This message that Paul and friends set out with, this message about God reconciling the world to him in Christ Jesus-this same message is the one entrusted to us, the one God wants us to take to Modesto and the world. A call for help motivated Paul. The same call motivates us. **"Help us!" - A Cry for the Gospel.**

This cry comes through God's direction

Our instinct when we hear names like Phrygia, Mysia, Troas and Bithynia is to tune out, right? "Five-dollar Bible names. Irrelevant to me." Not so fast. We should find out about these places, just a little. Here was the plan. Paul and friends had just visited some young churches. Now they intended to go to the region of Asia. This seemed like a good plan. There were some big cities in Asia: Ephesus, Sardis, Thyatira. It makes sense to do mission work where there are people. But the Holy Spirit prevented them from going there.

We don't know how this happened. Did God appear to Paul in a vision or something and tell him not to go there? Maybe. It could have been just the circumstances that they were in that kept them from going where they had planned.

So they went to Plan B. They attempted to go north. Again, a sensible idea. There were cities there, too, and people to evangelize. But again, the Holy Spirit in some way nixed the idea. So the team went over to Troas, a port city, wondering where to go next.

I wonder if they were a little frustrated. They had had two good plans, and God had not let either one happen. All they could do now was sit and wait.

They didn't have to wait long. **During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.**

How's that for some direction! It made sense now. God hadn't let them follow through on their two plans because he had a plan. Some people needed good news, and Paul's team had good news to give. There were people dying in sins, and Paul had God's authority to forgive those sins so that they could live.

In all of this, this good news was the driving force behind Paul and the other missionaries. Paul knew the power of this good news firsthand. He had been a God-hater, a killer of Christians. Then Jesus had stopped him and brought him to realize the severity of his guilt in the sight of God. But then Jesus had given Paul good news: he was forgiven. Paul had been baptized for the forgiveness of his sins. Paul knew good news. He wanted other people to know it to. The love Christ had shown him compelled him to share what he knew with the world, to answer people's cry for help.

We, too, know good news. We have heard it already several times this morning. We are by nature sinful, and we have disobeyed God in our thoughts, words, and actions. For this we deserve his punishment. But God has been merciful to us, given his only Son to atone for our sins, and he now forgives us fully. That is the love of God in Christ, the same love Paul knew. This love compels us, too, to tell the good news we know. I don't expect to see a vision tonight ("Come over to our subdivision and help us!"). But God has made us aware of a need and given us a commission. Jesus says, **Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.** (Mark 16:15) This is the message that God has put in the hearts and mouths of all Christians.

That's how we got here, right? Some Christian—a friend, a parent, a teacher, a pastor, someone—brought the good news of Jesus to us, or brought us to the good news. And behind that person was someone else who brought them. Behind that person was... you see what I mean. We today have eternal life because the Holy Spirit led someone to answer a call and share good news with us.

Why stop now? Why not share what we have received? We don't have to go to Africa. We can each use opportunities we have to pray, and to witness and to give, so that the work of sharing the good news with people who need it may continue. This cry for help comes through God's direction. It came to Christians before us when we needed help, and it comes now to you and me.

The best part about this call, as we see in the case of Paul and company, is that God provides the means to answer it.

This cry calls for an urgent response

Paul and his friends set out from Troas. They get favorable winds and arrive in Macedonia in just a couple days. They make their way to a leading city in the region, a city called Philippi. After a few days to orient themselves, they make their way outside the city, near a river. They expected to find Jewish people there, close to the water for their ceremonial washings. They did. Some women were there, including one from Thyatira named Lydia. She was a dealer of the purple cloth for which her home city was famous. She had become Jewish, and she listened to Paul and his friends, as another woman had once listened to Jesus. God works through the simple message. He opens her heart. She and her whole household are baptized. Then, she offers to help Paul and his friends so that they can keep bringing good news to more people like her.

Stop and look at what's going on here. The mission team is stuck in Troas, having run into a couple of dead ends. Where will they go? What will they do? Lo and behold, God provides them with direction. "Come over here to Macedonia and help us!" But how will they get there? God speeds them on their way! How will they find anyone to talk to? God directs them. What will they say? God has provided them with a message-the greatest piece of news that anyone could ever hear. But how can people, like us dead in sin, blind to the truth, hostile to God-how can people like this ever pay attention to this message about Jesus Christ, much less believe it? Look! The Lord himself is opening people's hearts to the gospel! And how will this ministry continue? How will more people hear the good news? Well, it just so happens that the woman whose heart the Lord opens has the financial means to support the mission team. He washes her in baptism. He brings her life and salvation. She responds by using what she has to spread the good news farther.

Do you see what's going on here? God puts out a call, a call to help people in need of saving. Then God himself answers that call, using regular people like you and me to do it.

In view of all this, let me ask you a question. Will there ever be any opportunity to share the message of Christ-any opportunity that we will have to write off immediately, saying, "Nope. Can't do it. Too big for us"? Will there ever be? No! How can I say that? Because it's not all about "us." It's about him.

It has been noted, and I think I agree with this, that the book of Acts in the Bible is inappropriately named. The official name of the book is The Acts of the Apostles. Sure, Peter and Paul and the other apostles are prominent in the book. But who is really "active" in Acts? It's Jesus with his gospel. It's the Holy Spirit with his fire. It's the Father with his providence.

Who's active at St. Peter? The same Holy Trinity. Our God is the one calling on us to work. He is the one giving us the opportunities. And this is key: he is the one enabling us to seize those opportunities.

Like Paul and his crew, we too will have our Asias and Bithynias-times when we come up with a good plan, and then, in some way, the Holy Spirit prevents us from carrying it out. But make no mistake, the Holy Spirit will get his work done. He has begun it already, baptizing us into Christ, saving us, making us new. He is still at work, fortifying us with his living and active Word and his precious Sacrament. He will provide the opportunities to bring his good news to more and more people. He will give us the wherewithal to seize those opportunities.

Jesus once said, "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." (John 9:4,5) In other words, we do not have an unlimited time to believe this good news about Jesus, nor do we have an unlimited time to share it. The good news, however, is that Jesus is at work even now, bringing light to our darkness, and shining through our words and actions to bring light to the world.

What else can we do but work while it is day? *Amen.*