

such terrible trials? Straight to Lydia's house. They knew she was faithful, trust-worthy, and able to provide for them.

Lydia's story reminds us that in Christ, we are free to serve with generosity and hospitality, sharing what we have to bless others. We can do that because our God is free to call whoever God wants, to use whoever God wishes to bless the world. God can speak through outsiders, as often as through those who are already part of the fold. God can speak through rich people, just as easily as the down and out. God can work through those seeking faith, just as easily as through those who have never had an inkling of it before. This summer, the children at our Vacation Bible School learned the story of Lydia and her powerful encounter at the river. Leaders reminded the children that God is free to call all kinds of different people, and God does that all the time. The curriculum said, "Kids hear adults compartmentalize people by race, political party, church denomination, "pro" or "anti" this-and-that—the list is endless. As a result, kids may view people in groups—groups they are (or are not) part of. And too often, people view Christians as exclusive, seeking to keep people out. Yet God loves everyone! A friendship with God is a possibility for everyone! No one is left out or excluded from a friendship with God. How unifying... and freeing!"

It's freeing to know that God is at work out in the world through all kinds of people, not just people in the church, or people who seem to be living in the way we deem "right." It's freeing to know that the Spirit is preparing us to encounter God, maybe not at the river, but maybe at work, or in the challenges of family life, or in a chance interaction with a stranger. And like it happened for Lydia, it happens for us: the grace of Christ has set us free from all that binds us - society's expectations, our assumptions about ourselves, the sin that clings so close. God has set us free to love others through the particular gifts we have been given. We are all free to serve and to love because of the streams of grace that God has already poured out for us.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

September 1, 2024

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

"Down in the River to Pray"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Acts 16:13-15, 40

*As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the starry crown
Good Lord, show me the way*

*O sinners, let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
O sinners, let's go down
Down in the river to pray.*

That song was popularized in the movie, "O Brother Where Art Thou," and on the sound track, where bluegrass artist Alison Kraus sang it. The plot of the movie follows a group of escaped convicts in 1937, as they travel the South in search of freedom and a fortune. In one scene, the escapees encounter an almost angelic group of hundreds of worshippers, all dressed in white, heading to a river to be baptized. They're singing that song, as they walk to the river, where the preacher will dunk them under the water. To his friends' great surprise, one of the ex-cons feels the spirit moving in their song. He runs headlong down in the river to pray and be baptized alongside them.

That's where Lydia was. Down at the river, at the place of prayer. When the Apostle Paul and his companions met her, Lydia was what was known as a worshiper of God. She was not Jewish by birth, so she was still an outsider in many ways. But she had been attracted to the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah. Maybe she'd even heard the stories of some of the women we've been reading about—Rahab, Deborah, Jael. Lydia was interested in this God and was curious to know what it meant to serve this God. Today, we might call her a seeker. Someone who felt a pull toward faith and spirituality, someone who took real interest in learning and practicing, but was not yet committed to any particular religious tradition.

1 Ronald Cole Turner, "Theological Perspective, Acts 16:9-15, Sixth Sunday of Easter" *Feasting on the Word, Year C., Vol 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 476.

The main thing we know about Lydia is that she was a dealer of purple cloth. This can seem like an extraneous detail that doesn't really matter. But those few words actually tell us quite a bit. Purple cloth, in that day, was extremely expensive. To get the dye to make fabric purple was an intensive and time-consuming process. And it was only the wealthy, sometimes even royalty, who could buy the finished cloth. So Lydia certainly made a good living selling such expensive products. She was no poor fisherman, like so many of Jesus' first disciples.

Lydia was also a woman dealing in purple cloth. It's not often the Bible tells about women's paid work. The times we do hear of women who had professions, the reference is often negative. Like Rahab, who we met last week, who was described as a prostitute. But for Lydia, the connotation is neutral, maybe even positive. She was a woman making her way in the world through her work, providing for the people in her household.

So what would have brought a woman like Lydia down to the river to pray? What could she have been seeking, exactly? Was Lydia looking for meaning in her life? Did she need a community to support her while she mourned the loss of someone she loved? Was she hoping to discover a way to live her life outside the confines society placed on her? When she went down to the river, was she seeking freedom from a world that weighed down on her, and made it challenging to be who she was?

Rivers are symbols of freedom and new life throughout the Bible. When the Israelites crossed the Jordan River, they entered the land God had promised. When John offered a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, it was in the River Jordan. The same place where Jesus was named and claimed by the Holy Spirit at his own baptism. The song from the movie is American in origin, and originally, it may have been an African American spiritual. The earliest published version of the song appeared in 1867 in a booklet called "Slave Songs of the United States." There have been many versions since then, some of which invite people "down to the river" and some that call folks "down in the river." Unless you're being baptized by immersion, it might seem odd to go in the river to pray. But for people on a journey to escape slavery in the U.S., rivers were often associated with freedom. When a person went into the river, dogs would lose the scent of people they were chasing. The river might mean safety, an ability to stay hidden, and continue the journey north. Songs shared on the route often contained coded messages like this one about the river, helping people know where to travel and what to look for. In the same way, the 'starry crown' in the song might have referenced a constellation in the night sky useful for navigation.

Recently, my family visited the Amherstburg Freedom Museum in Ontario. The exhibits share information about people who fled slavery in the United States and made their way to Canada. The museum uses the term "freedom seekers" to describe the people who were escaping slavery. This term is both descriptive of the people who made that journey and also honors their legacy in an empowering way. As they may have gone down in a river on their journey, freedom is exactly what they were seeking: physical freedom from the bondage and misery of a system that believed people could be bought and sold. And also freedom for their spirits to be whole and well; to be children of God who had dreams and goals; who could serve God and neighbor freely in the way of Christ.

Lydia found freedom in the river, too. Hers was freedom in the knowledge that she belonged to God, and was welcomed into a faith that she had not been born into. Freedom that God's grace had claimed her, long before she knew anything of it. This was the freedom offered in the good news of Jesus Christ. And freedom that resulted because of *God's* work in her life. God brought Paul and Lydia together, and the Spirit prepared her "heart to hear, receive, and understand."¹ She was so moved by the message of joy, salvation, and meaning that she responded by changing her life. She said 'yes' to the freedom and responsibility offered to her through the grace of Christ. And it was not only her life that was changed, but that of her whole household, as they were all baptized in the river together.

But Lydia's freedom was not just a metaphor. Freedom in Christ is not freedom to serve ourselves or to do whatever we want. In Christ, we are set free to serve one another with love. Lydia's freedom in Christ took the tangible form of hospitality and generosity, which she shared from that point forward. Right away she persuaded Paul and his companions to come to her house. The scripture says, "she prevailed upon them." She insisted that they come stay in her home, accepting a safe place to rest, eat, and sleep. Let's be careful here not to limit our imagination to the notion of traditional domestic work, as important and meaningful as that is. Remember, Lydia was wealthy. She opened her home to be a mission center, both a place of respite for God's servants and a place that supported those who went out to share the good news. She likely funded Paul's work in some way, ensuring he could travel and continue to share the gospel on this new continent. Her support, both in domestic hospitality and monetary gifts, allowed other people to encounter the freedom and good news of Jesus. Later on in verse 40, we read about Lydia's hospitality again. Paul and Silas had landed in prison for their message and God had set them free through the miracle of an earthquake. Where did they go after