

## **“Be Confident of This”**

Acts 16:9-15; Philippians 1:1-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – May 22, 2022

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might receive your wisdom and love and live in hope and peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Every once in a while, when things have been hard and it hasn't felt clear that they would ever get easier, a new breeze wafts in and makes it seem possible to breathe again. Have you ever had that happen? It's not that your difficult circumstances changed necessarily, but somehow your soul is mysteriously refreshed and you feel more able to face things again. We could call it a second wind. Or if we're feeling especially religious, we could call it the sustaining breath of the Holy Spirit.

This story we're looking at today, of Lydia and her sisters in ministry in Philippi, brought that breeze into my heart this week. Things have been hard around here, as we navigate the later stages of the pandemic and its impact on our congregational life, while simultaneously working through grief and loss and change. There are a lot of balls in the air, and our capacity to juggle is somewhat diminished at the moment. For a few weeks now, we've been talking and praying during the Sunday School hour, making space to listen for where God is leading, to imagine what God's future looks like, to consider how we might help birth new things into being. We've tried to slow down and avoid pretending the answers would easily emerge. Instead, we've just tried

to name the present moment for one another and sit with scriptures that might help us find God's presence in the midst of the mess.

So when the lectionary offered us that story from Acts that Dick read for us – and a good job he did, with all those Greek place names! – this story of Lydia, the founder of the church in Philippi, it pushed me into the letter to the Philippians, and that's where I found it. “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion.” That was the breeze that blew through my soul. As high as the stakes feel, and as hard as the journey seems right now, as much as it seems like the decisions we're making right now could be the birth of a new chapter or the beginning of the end, the thing we need to remind one another is that this story is not about our faithfulness; it's about God's faithfulness.

Let's start with Lydia, since she's the one who opened the window for this breeze. The story of Lydia is one of those foundational stories that unfortunately didn't become particularly foundational. The church could have learned something from this story about who God calls into leadership, but it's taken a long time for the message to sink in. She's a woman; she's a dealer in purple cloth. It's a luxury good, that purple cloth, but it's also probably a line of work that wouldn't have been considered all that “proper”. Most importantly, though, it appears Lydia is independent. She's the dealer of purple cloth; she's the head of the household. And she's the one who becomes the founder of the church in Philippi. So there is hope here for anyone who has been excluded from leadership within the church, whether

because of gender identity, sexual orientation, or race. I'm guessing someone in that town had, at some point, called Lydia "uppity." It's not that she didn't see the barriers her society was trying to put on her life; it's just that she decided not to let them determine her destiny. Instead, she opened her life up to the movement of the Holy Spirit and let that breeze take her where she needed to go.

It's important to grasp the full weight of this beginning for the church in Philippi because it tells us something about God. When Paul says later, "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you," this is the moment he's talking about. God began this good work with Lydia. And if God can use Lydia, God can use us. God can use you. God can use me. God is using us, for the good work here has already begun. This story is about God's faithfulness, not ours, but our participation in God's work is also part of the story.

And here's where the rest of Paul's prayer for the Philippians comes into play for me, with regard to the present moment we're sitting in. "This is my prayer," Paul writes, "that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best." Love is the grounding. But in order to live out that love, in alignment with the good work God is doing in our midst, we need to spend time in discernment. We need to seek the Holy Spirit's wisdom about how to live out our love. We need to reflect and assess. We need to examine the fruit of our efforts of love and see if they are matching up with our intentions or if we've somehow gotten things twisted up so they emerge as less than loving.

If we want to lean into the promise of God doing the good work in our midst, we need to ensure that our energy and time are aimed at the things the gospel asks of us. Are we feeding the hungry? Are we cultivating hope? Are we proclaiming liberation in the face of oppression? Are we confessing and repenting when the repressive systems of our society lure us into choices that exploit and de-humanize fellow children of God? Are we letting Jesus change us?

Lydia seems to have gotten baptized the day she met Paul and first heard the gospel he was preaching. But she didn't stop with baptism. She offered her hospitality to Paul and his companions. She invited them into her home. Was she prepared for guests? Who knows? But she welcomed them in anyway, and a good work was begun.

There have been many instances of hospitality over the almost-75 years Vista La Mesa Christian Church has lived on this corner. There have probably been some instances when we failed to provide hospitality. But like the Philippians, we have shared in the gospel and shared in God's grace. God is doing a good work here. We may not have a clear picture of what lies ahead. But Paul has offered us some guideposts. Hospitality is key. Love is vital. Clarity about how to live out that loving hospitality will come from discernment. When we pause to listen, to open the window to the breeze, to welcome in the Holy Spirit, that's when the "knowledge and full insight" we need to "determine what is best" will come. Be confident in this: the One who began a good work here is faithful. The One who has called us, each of us

and all of us together, into ministry in this place, is faithful. The One who provided us with the blessings we need to offer hospitality to our neighbors is faithful. The One who sends the breeze that refreshes our hearts and enlightens our minds with wisdom is faithful. This story we are living is a story about God's faithfulness. God's faithfulness is the source of our hope and confidence. Let us give thanks to God!

Hallelujah and Amen!