

“Roadblocks and Open Doors”

Acts 16:6-15

It is that time of year – the time when getting anywhere in this part of the world you can count on running into a roadblock or delay as PennDot or the city works on the roads or fills in the potholes. Wherever we may be headed it is always a good idea to factor in a delay or the need to take a detour before we reach our destination. I don’t know how you handle such roadblocks or delays, but they don’t do anything for my blood pressure or my disposition. I find them exceedingly frustrating. They have even tempted me to get a smart phone that will warn me of the obstacles standing in the way of my getting to where I want to go. But so far I have stuck with my old gps – which can be equally frustrating in getting me to my appointed destinations.

I mention all that because in our walks with the Lord it is not unusual for us to experience something similar to those roadblocks and delays as we seek to carry out the work our Savior has given us to do. But we shouldn’t be surprised by that. In the unfolding story of our redemption God’s people are always encountering such experiences. Joseph spent years in jail in Egypt before he carried out the work the Lord had prepared for him to do. Moses spent forty years tending his father-in-law’s sheep before he went back to Egypt to set his people free. David spent years as a shepherd and dodging Saul’s wrath before he became king. Elijah spent time in hiding being fed by the ravens before he confronted the false prophets on Mount Carmel. And Paul and Silas are blocked from going to Asia Minor and Bithynia.

And when you and I face apparent roadblocks in our efforts to know and do God’s will, I think it is imperative that we realize where those obstacles or hindrances ultimately come from. Luke writes, “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.” He goes on to say, “When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.” It is the work of the Holy Spirit to guide and direct our paths as we seek to know and do the Lord’s will. Which means that it is central to our Christian lives that we maintain an intimate personal relationship with the Third Person of the Trinity cultivating an openness to whatever and wherever He may be leading us.

Unfortunately, for many believers the Third Person of the Trinity is such a shadowy figure that they hardly can be said to know Him at all. He is more of a 'that' than a 'who.' They think of the Spirit more as a power than as a person. But the Scriptures make it clear that the Holy Spirit is the Third *Person* of the Trinity. He is Someone for us to know and relate to; Someone for us to talk to and listen to as we pray and read the Scriptures; Someone to pay attention to as we keep our eyes and ears and hearts open to signposts He puts along our way. And within the mystery of the Trinity, He is the Spirit of Jesus. He brings us the mind of Christ. He fills our hearts with the love of Christ. He empowers us with the life of Christ. As the servants of Jesus Christ it is the Spirit's work to guide and direct our lives.

As Paul and Silas set out on what has become known as their second missionary journey it apparently is their intention to take the Good News to the cities and towns of Asia Minor, including the important metropolitan area of Ephesus. But the Lord's intention for them is to spend their time traveling around the area of Phrygia and Galatia, planting and nurturing churches in that part of the world. And in some way, which Luke fails to reveal, they are kept from heading east. Then, when in their travels they turn to the north, and seek to enter Bithynia they face another roadblock as the Spirit refuses to allow them to head in that direction. So twice in their efforts to carry out the mission mandate they have received from the Lord through the Church in Antioch, Paul and his companions face roadblocks to their intentions.

As a result the missionary band heads west to the coast and the city of Troas. At this point Luke starts using the first person plural pronoun, we, in his telling of the story. It appears he joined Paul and Silas and Timothy when they arrived in Troas. And while they are in the city Paul is given a vision of a man from Macedonia, standing and begging, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Some students of the Bible think Luke may have been from Macedonia, from the city of Philippi, where Paul and his friends end up in our Scripture passage for this morning. For when the Apostle and his companions leave Philippi Luke goes back to the third person plural pronoun and writes in Acts 16:40, "Then they left." Perhaps it is Luke's arrival which prompts the Holy Spirit to send Paul his vision of the Macedonia man.

However that may be, when Paul arrives in Troas he receives the call to cross the Mediterranean Sea and begin a ministry in Europe, in what is now Greece. The Apostle acts immediately on the call he has received. He and his partners in mission book passage on a ship which takes them to the Island of Samothrace and on to the port city of Neapolis. From there they head inland to the city of Philippi, which, as Luke notes, is a Roman colony and the major city in that region. They spend several days there, and on the Sabbath, since they have not discovered a Jewish synagogue in the city, they search out a place where devout people may gather for prayer. When they find such a place just outside the city beside the stream which flows nearby, they discover that all the worshipers are women!

You can't say that God doesn't have a sense of humor. The Apostle is giving a vision of a man, calling to him. But when he arrives in Macedonia it's a group of women, whom the Lord has prepared to hear the Good News. One in particular, Lydia, a business woman, listens as Paul shares the story of God's saving love in Christ. And the Lord opens her heart to the message and she and her household are baptized. She insists on welcoming Paul, and the others into her home while they minister in the city of Philippi. As Luke's account continues we learn that others, including a once demon-possessed slave girl, a prison warden, and probably a number of convicts, all become believers who meet in Lydia's home as the first congregation of believers on the continent of Europe.

And if we read a few verses further in the sixteenth chapter of Acts we discover that the open door Paul and Silas walk through not only contains the joy of leading Lydia and her family to the Lord, it also ends up with them receiving a severe beating at the hands of the civil authorities and a long night locked up in the local jail. It is not the first time Paul has suffered for his faith, earlier he had been stoned by an angry mob. And with a sense of joy and privilege at being allowed to suffer for the sake of Christ he and Silas spend the night in chains praying and singing hymns to God. The open doors which the Holy Spirit sets before us are always opportunities for service, but they may come to us with the price tag of suffering attached. Such is the nature of the discipleship to which we are called.

So what are some of the things the Holy Spirit may want us to garner from the roadblocks and open doors which the Apostle Paul experiences on his second missionary journey? To me, one of the primary lessons we all need to remember is the importance of nurturing our relationship with God the Holy Spirit. As I said earlier, He is a relatively unknown commodity for far too many believers. So I would encourage us to look up all the Scriptures we can find regarding the Holy Spirit, telling us who He is, what He's like, and what He does, and then to think about how what we've found impacts our lives. And in an effort to cultivate the personal relationship He longs to have with us, I suggest intentionally directing some of our prayers to Him, specifically asking Him to guide and direct our daily lives.

Something else I'm pretty sure the Holy Spirit wants us to remember as we consider the opening phase of Apostle Paul's second missionary journey is that all of us are called to be missionaries ourselves. Both the word apostle and missionary have at their center the idea of someone who is being sent to do something. The Spirit doesn't send too many believers on journeys like the Apostle's, nor to spend their lives in distant lands taking the Word to those who have never heard it. But the Lord Jesus has given all of us the task of being His witnesses wherever we may be. Our mission is to introduce others to Him and help them become His disciples with us. Wherever we are, we can be sure that God has placed us there and that the Holy Spirit will provide us with opportunities to be witnesses for Christ.

The challenge we face as we seek to live out our faith is how to deal with those times and places that seem to be roadblocks. I have a dear friend who is now in her nineties. When she faces a number of options regarding how to live for the Lord she uses her own wisdom to narrow the choices down to one or two. She then picks the one she thinks is God's will and tells the Holy Spirit that's what she intends to do. And if that isn't the Lord's will she asks Him to put such an obstacle in her way so she knows she needs to find another option. So when she faces a roadblock she is pretty sure the Lord has something else in mind for her. That, it seems to me, is a godly way to discern God's will.

Paul has also left us his own example of persevering in the face of the obstacles we face in seeking to be faithful. Just because the Spirit prohibits him from preaching in Asia Minor doesn't keep Paul from taking the Word to Phrygia and Galatia. And when he is not allowed to go to Bithynia he heads to Troas. The Apostle trusts that if he keeps on moving the Spirit will show him where to go. He maintains an openness to the possibility that in some way God will intervene and make clear what he is to do next. As someone once said, "God wants us to plan our days and He will take care of providing the interruptions. We probably won't get a vision as Paul did. But if we are open the Holy Spirit will enable us to recognize those individuals and situations where we're called to be witnesses for the Son of God.

And when the Lord opens a door for us we shouldn't be surprised by what we find when we walk through it. Paul is assuming that when he gets to Philippi he will find a Jewish synagogue where he can share the Good News. But there is no synagogue in the city, and the place of prayer outside the city walls is populated by women. The Macedonian man who called to Paul is nowhere to be found. So the Apostle takes the opportunity to tell those women about Jesus. And you and I should never be surprised at the people the Lord brings into our lives, with whom He would have us share our faith. Our God is no respecter of persons. There are people we might never expect to be open to the Gospel whom the Holy Spirit has been preparing to hear it, and to hear it from you or me.

By the same token, Paul's experience in Philippi reminds us that not everyone who hears the Good News will receive it with joy or welcome us as Lydia welcomed him. As a result of freeing a demon-possessed slave girl, he and Silas end up being beaten and thrown in jail. I venture to say that is not too likely to happen to you and me when we are faithful in our calling to be witnesses for Christ. But the reality is that on the other side of the open doors the Holy Spirit presents to you and me there may well be a price to be paid. At the heart of Christ's call are the words, "Take up your cross and follow Me." Our lives are to be living sacrifices, and sacrifices are always painful. Open doors hold great joy, but that joy may even come from suffering for Jesus' sake. That, too, should not surprise us.

So, the next time you find yourself feeling inconvenience or frustrated by a roadblock or a detour or a long wait for a flagger to let you head on your way, I hope you will take a few moments while you're waiting or in the process of finding your way, to think about the fact that God is sending you on a mission and that the Holy Spirit has a reason for the obstacles and delays we face. Like Paul, we don't need to know the reason for them, we simply need to keep our eyes and ears open, take advantage of the opportunities we find where we are, and trust that there are open doors waiting for us just around the bend. For, if we belong to the Son of God, He has commissioned us and sends us, for He has work for us to do. And the Holy Spirit will provide both the roadblocks and the open doors to guide us on our way. Amen.

Charge and Benediction

Never forget, if you belong to Jesus, you are a missionary. You go nowhere by accident. Wherever you go God is sending you. Wherever you are God has placed you there, and has a purpose in your being there. The Spirit of Jesus who dwells in you has something He wants to do through you – right where you are. Pay attention to the roadblocks and the open doors and be faithful witnesses to the Son of God. And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God our heavenly Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all every step of the way. Amen.