

**Drowning in Grace****May 26, 2018, Easter 6C**

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**Scripture: Acts 16:9-15**

16:9 During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

16:10 When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

16:11 We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis,

16:12 and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days.

16:13 On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.

16:14 A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.

16:15 When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

**Proclamation**

Our 2 year old son, Avery, nearly drowned.

We were at a neighbor's pool only a week after Hallie was born.

Avery ran ahead of me and before I knew it, he climbed the ladder and soon was bobbing below the surface of the water.

Somehow, the Spirit gave me presence of mind to gently lay down a newborn Hallie on the soft grass, and leap in the pool.

I pulled him up- gasping for air, eyes wide open, discovering the danger of water.

He looked totally surprised that water does not hold like solid ground.

His world had been rocked.

You would think that would teach him, but the same thing happened the next summer at a Youth group pool party.

He ran ahead of me and jumped in with the youth.

He bobbed below the surface again before I could get his swimmy on.

And to this day Avery remembers, "J. Robert H saved my life."

I think of the line from the hymn, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing"

*Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God;*

*he, to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.*

Two year olds are naturally curious and wander sometimes.  
 We laugh that I actually bought a kid leash for Avery soon after Hallie was born.  
 I could not keep him still.  
 Now he's wandered to Germany to study abroad.  
 That leash never did work. I think I only used it once.  
 One of the first lessons I learned as a parent is that I am no longer fully in control.  
 And surprises, like what happened in the pool that day, require me to pay attention.

Life has a way of surprising us, keeping us on our toes.  
 The Holy Spirit is always moving, never on a leash.  
 When we respond to the Spirit's leading, we never know what might happen,  
 so we pay attention, listen, and stay alert.  
 A vision of a man from Macedonia pleading for help propels Paul to sail there from Troas.  
 Lydia heads to the river to pray and finds a man who tells her about Jesus.  
 So she is baptized that day.  
 Or you think everyone you love is ok and safe, and a crisis, a tumor, an accident, changes everything in  
 a moment.  
 Or you plan to work in a company, a career for life, and the market changes, you are downsized or  
 moved.  
 And you discover that in the end God was with you the whole time.

"All you thought was solid and sure turns liquid beneath your feet,  
 and you go down only to be pulled up and plopped safely in the arms of a loving parent.  
 Afterwards, you attempt to make sense of it all: the near drownings, the last-minute changes in course,  
 the extended suffering and the miraculous turnarounds, healings and new beginnings," writes Jill  
 Duffield.<sup>1</sup>

The Holy Spirit is always on the move, and Jesus is working among us.  
 God calls us to do something we never considered.  
 Like Paul meeting Lydia,  
 When I think of Lydia's response, I hear John Calvin's motto: "My heart I offer, Lord, promptly and  
 sincerely."  
 Lydia offers her heart,  
 and the town of Philippi is impacted by a community of believers.  
 God moves, acts, transforms, and saves us.

Following the Spirit's leading Michael Billester tells his story.  
 He visited a small town in Poland in the late 1930's shortly before World War II began.

He met a man in the village and gave him a single Bible.  
 The man passed the bible onto others who also were converted,  
 until 200 people had become believers through one Bible.

When Billester returned to the little town in 1940, the group of Christians invited him to preach at their worship service.

He thought about asking the members to give testimonies, but decided to ask several in the congregation to recite verses of Scripture.

One man stood and asked, "Perhaps we have misunderstood. Did you mean chapters or verses?"

These villagers had not just memorized a few select verses of the Bible,  
 but whole chapters and books.

Thirteen people knew Matthew, Luke, and half of Genesis.

Another had learned the whole book of Psalms.

The single copy of the Bible given by Billester had sunk deeply into the community  
 and the hearts of those who received it.

One Bible and hundreds of lives changed.<sup>ii</sup>

This short story in Acts of Lydia being converted and baptized,  
 may seem of little significance.

But that encounter with Paul changed her, and then her community.

Lydia had been seeking God by meeting with the Jewish women by the river.

She was a god-fearing woman, but until Paul told her about Jesus,  
 she was outside the covenant community.

Now by faith in Jesus the Messiah-Christ, she has been saved by grace,  
 adopted into the covenant family of faith.

Gentiles could now be included.

And it all happened because Paul had a vision, trusted that it was the Spirit of God leading him, and went.

Life has a way of surprising us, keeping us on our toes.

The Holy Spirit is always moving, never on a leash.

Paul is likely surprised to see Lydia and a group of women by the river,

But the Spirit was including not only Gentiles, but women into the faithful service.

When Lydia opens her heart and receives God's word, her life will lead to another surprise,  
 she and her household are baptized,

Lydia's house became ground zero of the mission in Philippi.

Lydia, a woman of means, shares her home with Paul's mission team.

Lydia's faith becomes a game changer for the region of Macedonia.  
 Later we read in the Letter to the Philippians of a thriving and loving community of faith.

One woman's faith sparks a movement.  
 God is always working to change one person at a time,  
 but not only for that one person's sake.  
 God is building communities of hope, love, faith.  
 Lydia chose to listen and to respond.  
 One heart, one home, one town...like the ripples in a river,  
 a river of God's redeeming and life-changing grace.

Perhaps you are ready for a change. You have been seeking God with your whole heart,  
 Or maybe, like Avery bobbing below the surface, you have felt the solid ground turn liquid under your  
 feet, you find you are in need of a deep and abiding grace, to sustain you, to save you.  
 You surrender into the depth of water, trusting God to raise you up, grab you and take hold of your  
 life.  
 Or maybe know you have been wandering, and now you are found,  
 so thankful, you want to recommit to following Jesus.  
 And now you are ready to serve, and share that grace with others.

Baptism is surrender into the able arms of God.  
 We find ourselves drowning- but this time, drowning in grace.  
 It is through our Baptism that we are claimed by Christ  
 and adopted into that covenant of God's grace.  
 In a moment we will all be invited to remember our baptism.  
 And if you are considering baptism, any of the pastors or the elder today can speak with you about that  
 decision.

Michael Billester's story of the little town of Poland reminds us that one life changed, one Bible shared,  
 one faithful risk taken for God's Kingdom can be the impetus that creates real communities of change.  
 Lydia's home becomes a place of welcome, where poor widows found belonging, and hope.  
 In the book of Acts we continue to see that of all of God's big, mighty Acts, open hearts become  
 changed hearts.  
 And one open heart will lead to a life of grace lived out.

As we remember Lydia this day, I cannot help but hear to words of  
 475- Verse 3 Come, Thou Fount

*O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!*

*Let that grace now like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee.  
Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love;  
here's my heart; O take and seal it; seal it for thy courts above.*

**Prayer:** Gracious God, through a vision you sent forth Paul to preach the gospel and called the women to the place of prayer on the Sabbath. Grant that we may be like Paul and be found like Lydia, our hearts responsive to your word and open to go where you lead us. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Thanks to Jill Duffield, *Looking into the Lectionary*, for this helpful analogy.

<sup>ii</sup> "Only one Bible," Bible.org, February 2, 2009, <https://bible.org/illustrations/onlyonebible>