



"Changing Landscapes"
Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"
Acts 16:11-40
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Hometown, does that illicit a lot of memories and feelings? How about Vacation Bible School? How many of you went to VBS when you were kids? Many, many of you. How many of you have sent your kids? VBS has been around for a long time. One theory was that it was begun in 1894 in Hopedale, Illinois by a woman named, D.T. Miles, who was a public school teacher and also a Sunday school teacher. She thought it might be a good opportunity during the summer for the kids to get more Bible training. She opened the first school using the local elementary school and the park for recess and had 40 kids enrolled in that first VBS.

Another theory is that it started in 1896 in New York City. That there was a woman named, Eliza Hawes who was very concerned about what it was like for kids on the street during the summer and concerned about their vulnerability and the injuries they were experiencing. She decided to rent a local beer hall on the east side and have every day Bible school. Well apparently, there was good attendance until the pastor said, "You know, why don't we move it into the church?" They moved it into the church, attendance fell off, and so Eliza said, "I'm going back to the streets." This began in 1896, Eliza kept it going, and over the next few years, there were vacation Bible schools started in Philadelphia and Chicago.

In 1923, Standard Publishing House wrote up the first curriculum. Today there are churches all over the United States, in fact all over the world, hosting their own Vacation Bible Schools. In fact, this next week our mission team in Nicaragua will be hosting a VBS in Managua for the children there.

Well VBS is one way in which believers continue to live out the theme of Acts, captured in Acts 1:8. Remember how Jesus told the disciples that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them and that they would be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judah and Samaria and to the ends of the Earth. Amazingly, that same Holy Spirit power at work in Acts so long ago and in such a different time and such a different place continues to be at work in our world.

Our text today talks about that Holy Spirit witness and demonstrates how that power impacted the lives of three individuals, how their lives were changed after hearing the Gospel. As we begin to look at the text today, let's invite the Holy Spirit to be our teacher.

Would you pray with me?

Lord we are so thankful that you have sent the Spirit and we pray even now as we study Your word that Your Spirit would guide us and teach us, that we would not just be hearers of Your Word, but doers. We pray Lord that You would illumine the truth, that You would pierce our hearts and minds and that You would reveal to us the way to follow you. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Lydia was a successful businesswoman from Thyatira, engaged in the textile industry – specifically in the making of purple cloth for which Thyatira was famous – and although she was a Gentile, she must have been something of a God seeker. For, along with a group of women, she gathered regularly by the river at a place of prayer to worship the God of the Jews. It was to this place of prayer that **Paul and Silas went that Sabbath morning**. Although Philippi was a leading city in the district of Macedonia, there was no established synagogue there, perhaps because there were so few Jewish males. Instead, the women went out of the way of the city officials and worshipped near the river.

The Spirit led Paul and his companions to that very place and to those whose hearts had been prepared to hear and respond to the Gospel. Paul and Silas spent time sharing their message with these women and before long we read that, “..the Lord opened Lydia’s heart to respond.” She and the members of the household were baptized and they she persuaded Paul and the others to come and stay at her house. Lydia certainly strikes us as an eager convert. It doesn’t seem that she wasted any time wondering how her decision might impact her family, her business or her community. She was convinced and so she acted immediately, following it up with an act of hospitality.

Lydia is considered to be the first Christian convert in Philippi and in fact the first Christian convert in all of Europe. Although we don’t read any more about her in the New Testament, it is clear from Paul’s letter to the Philippians church that Paul was deeply grateful for the community there and for the joy they brought to him – a community of faith that begun with Lydia’s conversion.

Well not everyone’s conversion story is quite so dramatic. **C.S. Lewis describes himself as a reluctant convert and his conversion has taken place over a number of years** – moving him from atheism to theism and eventually to the Christian faith. He says in this autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, that, “he was brought into Christianity like a prodigal – kicking, struggling, restfully and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape.” “Night after night,” he wrote, “..feeling whenever his mind lifted even for a second from his work the steady unrelenting approaching of Him, he so earnestly desired not to meet.”

In that trinity year of 1929, Lewis gave in and admitted that God was God and knelt and prayed becoming in his office the most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England. Not quite so eager as Lydia. And this was simply his conversion to theism. Two years later in 1931, he took yet another step and went on to accept the incarnation that Jesus Christ was indeed God made flesh. Lewis says about this step that while he knew when it was taken, he hardly knew how. “One sunny morning when we set out,” he writes, “I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God and when we reached our destination I did. I had not exactly spent the journey in thought, nor in great emotion. It was more like a man after a long sleep, still motionless in bed becoming aware that he is now awake.”

The story of C.S. Lewis’ conversion is different from the story of Lydia’s. Just as my story is different from your story. Each of us has our own story. A story that is a source of the unique witness we each have to share about Jesus Christ. While many of us would like a script, a set of instructions on how to be

an effective witness and even on how to have the vision and miraculous experiences reported by Paul, today's text reminds us that Paul showed up in obedience to the Spirit's leading. That he shared the message with those whose hearts had been prepared and that it was God who opened Lydia's heart to respond or literally, in the Greek – the Lord opened her heart to pay attention, to attend to Paul's words.

The Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth, has been sent to guide, teach and empower Jesus' followers and to open the hearts of men and women like Lydia. This same Spirit is active today. Perhaps what we need to do is not master some script, but cultivate our ability to pay attention, immersing ourselves in God's word and listening for His Spirit to guide and to teach amidst the changing landscapes of our lives. I believe this is true for us individually and for us as a congregation. There is no one script for the church of the 21st century. God is calling us to discern our unique role in contribution as we witness to the Good News and this place and at this time. We need to pray, asking the Lord to open our hearts to attend to the Spirit in our midst.

After Lydia's conversion, Paul continued to join the others at the place of prayer by the river. It seems that there was a fortune telling slave girl who followed Paul, drawing attention by shouting, "These men are the servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved." Her behavior may have been troublesome, putting Paul at risk with the authorities. At the very least, it was annoying to Paul and so one day he confronted her and commanded the Spirit to come out in the name of Jesus Christ. With these words she was delivered. She was sent free no longer possessed by the evil spirit, but also no longer able to predicate the future and earn money for her masters. Needless to say her new found freedom met with resistance and her owners stirred up the crowds and the authorities against Paul and his companions. While the text doesn't reveal what happened to the girl or whether or not she became a believer, it does demonstrate **the power of God to deliver people from bondage, to set them on the road to freedom. That same power is at work today.**

All-star outfielder for the Texas Rangers, **Josh Hamilton, knows something about being set free.** While at the age of 18, Josh says he found Jesus, the truth was Jesus didn't make a lot of difference in his life. Despite becoming the number one draft pick for Tampa Bay as a high school baseball player and receiving a four million dollar checking for signing, Josh's career was off to rocky start. He struggled with a series of injuries and increasing addiction to drugs and alcohol, so that by the year 2002 he was in a downward spiral and for the next four years spent much of his time in a crack and booze induced haze, bouncing between trailer homes and expensive rehab centers. According to his autobiography, it wasn't until he finally surrendered to God and began to pray not for the Lord to get him out of the mess he made, but instead offering God his life and being willing to let God to with it what He wanted that Josh's life began to change.

Not long after, reading his Bible, he stumbled onto **James 4:7 that says, "Humble yourselves before God, resist the devil and he will flee from you."** Josh writes that at that moment he went cold turkey and began to experience freedom from his addictions to drugs and alcohol. Now he is an all star outfielder for the Texas Rangers and has been clean ever since and is arguably the best player in professional baseball. Last year he led the Rangers to the World Series and was named the American League's most valuable player.

In a recent *Christianity Today* interview, Josh said, "It's amazing I'm still alive, after all I've done to my body. My granny told me during those days that God had something special planned for me; otherwise, I would have died." Josh Hamilton's witness is uniquely his; a testimony to God's transforming power at work in the life of one surrendered man.

Well, not all of us suffer from addiction to alcohol or drugs. Most of us remain in bondage to behaviors and patterns that are harmful and destructive, rendering us unable or unwilling to love God or our neighbor as Christ calls us to do. **We too need to be freed.** Free to love, free to serve, free to forgive and free to be in community, one with another. **After all, it is for freedom that Christ has set us free.** God invites us to, like Josh, acknowledge our addictions and our negative behaviors honestly. To take responsibility for the choices that we've made and to surrender our lives to Him. In doing so we open the way for God to work powerfully in our lives and in the life of our congregation.

Well Paul's visit to Philippi appears to have been successful. He has lead Lydia and her household to faith in Christ and planted the first church of Philippi down by the river. He has also successfully delivered the Spirit of the slave girl. Clearly, he and Silas are seeing God at work in powerful ways. But, it also seems that there is a cost. There are those who don't see the Gospel as Good News, but rather as a threat to their lucrative income. There are those who resist the work of the Spirit and who in turn drag Paul and Silas into the market place to incite the grounds against them and to convince the authorities that in fact they were troublemakers. Paul and Silas were stripped, beaten, thrown into jail having freed the girl, they become the ones in captivity. Amazingly in the midst of their suffering, they continue to witness for the Good News. They were praying and singing hymns to God at midnight, a testimony to Paul's ability to be content in all circumstances and everything to give thanks.

I must confess a few weeks ago when I was experiencing back pain, I would have found it difficult to emulate Paul's zeal and hymn singing at midnight – reminding me again how much I have to learn. Well in the midst of that impromptu worship service, they experience of all things, a violent earthquake, shaking the very foundations of that prison. Only this earthquake appears to have some positive results, opening the prison doors and loosening their chains.

The jailer's response was one of such intense fear, of such terror, not because of the earthquake, but because of the consequences of the prisoners' escape that he was ready to kill himself. Ironically, it was the prisoner Paul who reassured him and to whom the jailer cried to help saying, "What must I do to be saved?" Through these socking circumstances, both the earthquake and Paul's decision not to escape, this jailer came to believe. After treating the prisoners' wounds and after being baptized along with this family, he invited the prisoners to his house for a meal. What a surprising turn of events.

We are reminded yet again of God's extraordinary power, not only to change hearts, not only to free people from bondage, but also to heal the most broken of relationships and to create the most unlikely of communities.

Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison in South Africa. During his time on Robben Island he developed a friendship with a young, unquestioningly pro-apartheid white prison guard named, Cristo Brand. Through their interactions Brand's views of Mandela and of apartheid changed. In a newspaper interview a few years ago, Brand described their relationship saying, "When I came to the prison, Mandela was already 60 years old. He was down to earth and courteous. Treating me with respect and so my respect grew for him." Apparently, Brand began to do favors for Mandela, smuggling him the bread and hair pomade he liked and bringing him messages. Mandela actually became worried that if he got caught he might be punished. He took an interest in this young man and even encouraged him to continue his studies.

When Mandela was moved to Pollsmoore Prison in 1982, the prison guard Brand was transferred there too. It was there that Mandela actually visited Brand's home and met his wife, even holding his young

son was he was just a few months old. Their friendship endured, even after Mandela's release from prison. In fact, in February of 2010 on the 20th anniversary of that release, Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first black president, invited this former prison guard, Cristo Brand to the anniversary dinner.

Is your vision for what God's power can do in healing broken relationships in creating the most unlikely of new communities too limited? **Nothing is impossible with God.** In fact, in Colossians, Paul writes that God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Christ and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. May our hearts and minds be open to the new reality God wants to create.

Yes, the landscape of our lives, the landscape of our world keeps changing. Sometimes that change is gradual and barely perceptible and other times it is so dramatic that we hardly recognize where we are. For me the changing landscape of these past few weeks with back surgery and then our son, Joshua's car accident, has reminded me of my powerlessness in the face of the pain and circumstances over which I have no control.

At the same time, **these same circumstances have served to remind of God's faithfulness and of the ways in which God powerfully meets our needs.** The same power that was at work through Paul is still at work today. Nothing is impossible for God. He is able to open hearts to the Gospel message and our hearts to attend to His Word and Spirit. He is able to exercise demons and free people like Josh Hamilton from addiction to drugs and alcohol. He is able to free us from unhealthy behaviors. Just as He affected reconciliation between Paul and the jailer, he can do the same for us.

These stories give me hope, reminding me that He really is able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine according to His power at work within us. In the midst of our changing landscapes, God is present and His Spirit is active. Are we willing to trust Him today?

Would you pray with me?

God of grace and power, God of mercy and love. God who opens hearts and minds to the truth. God who brings healing to broken relationships. God we come thankful for Your Word, thankful for Your Spirit, thankful for each other. We come, Lord, asking that You would be at work in our lives, that we might be fully surrendered to You – that you would be Savior and Lord of our lives. That we would become the new creations, building new communities that bring honor and glory to Your name. Lord, we confess that we cannot do this, but that You God, You are God of the impossible. So, we pray that you would do that impossible through us. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.