Easter 6C, Acts 16.9-15
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There's a line in the First Book of Samuel I find strangely comforting. "Now the word of the Lord was rare in those days. Visions were not widespread." I love the calmness of the observation, delivered more like a weather report than an indictment. Actually, folks in the days of Samuel were probably more likely than we are to believe their weather really was an expression of divine favor or displeasure. But in 1 Samuel 3, all we hear is the story took place in a time when God didn't seem to come around much anymore.

I have been formed—and I assume you have too—by a culture that says being responsible means cutting your own path. It means not expecting anyone else to do what you can do for yourself. Make your own luck, we're told, by making something of your life. It's easy to let these messages and values seep into our understanding of the Christian way as well, isn't it? We can think that if we haven't heard from God lately, or maybe ever, if we mean literally hearing a voice… we can think that God's silence or God's absence must be on us. Maybe we don't have enough faith. Maybe it's our anemic prayer life or sporadic attempts to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner. Maybe we just aren't quite worthy of a divine visit. It's not that scripture doesn't care about how we live. But when we actually read the Bible, there doesn't seem to be a straight line between being upright and hearing from God. At least not always. There's a mercy in this, I think.

Don't worry. The Lord didn't come to me in a vision and tell me to preach about Samuel instead of any of today's readings. I just thought there might be someone else in the room who can tend to see life as one big performance review. Maybe there's also someone here besides me, who's never had a proper vision, or spoken in tongues, or audibly heard from God. Maybe you too will find comfort in the fact that for all the pentecostal pyrotechnics in the Acts of the Apostles, it feels more like a spiritual high-pressure system moved in rather than that God's power and presence were summoned by some exceptionally holy human beings. Visions were happening all over the place in those days. The Holy Spirit was on the move.

If you're psychoanalyzing this sermon, you've probably noted that the preacher has just taken a lot of trouble justifying the lack of visions and miracles in his own life. He seems bent on telling you maybe this isn't entirely his fault, doesn't he? But when we do set aside the notion that God's Holy Spirit comes when we call her just right, when we remember that she blows where she will, which we're told explicitly and shown pretty clearly in scripture, we might notice other moments that actually say

more about how God wants all of us to live, whatever the spiritual forecast happens to be. And at times, the truth for us might lie as much in the tone or the spirit in which the story is told as it does in the acts of these apostles themselves.

"During the night Paul had a vision," we're told. In that vision, a man of Macedonia appears and asks for help. So, Paul gets up and heads off with his friends to find the man. Then, we get one of those breezy travelogue passages. "We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, 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…" There's a bracing optimism, a hopeful sense of expectation that filled those sails in Troas. I half expect to hear an Irish Sea shanty being whistled in the background as St. Paul and company head off on another adventure.

Let's read on. "On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river," says our narrator Luke, "where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. 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."

There's a lot of radical stuff packed calmly into those three sentences. We're reminded that these were faithful Jews, looking for a place to say their sabbath prayers. They're also people who'd been formed in the way of Jesus. We know this not by the visions, but by the way they sit down and speak to the women by the river. The bright expectancy in the story blows the apostles right past a social norm. Just as Jesus did so often, they find themselves in conversation with people they'd been taught to avoid or ignore. But please note. There's no sense of stern religious obligation driving the story. Paul didn't step outside the gate and say, "Well, shoot, guys. There's a bunch of women down there at the river and I think we all know Jesus would want us to talk to them." No. A holy expectancy hums through the narrative. A hopeful curiosity drives the apostles toward other people because, now that God might be present to us even in the lives of executed criminals and even gentiles and foreigners, every human encounter is brimming with possibility.

I want more of that curious expectancy in my life, don't you? It's not that I don't want outright miracles and visions at times. I do. Believe me. Some days I really do. A couple of weeks ago a friend of Calvary lost her housing and was back on the street. Connie Marshall called every number she could find for women's emergency shelters in Memphis. Some places didn't return her call for days. No beds available in the others. A six month wait list in one. In eight years I can't remember hearing of a single night when the Union Rescue Mission didn't have an open bed for a man. If we think our society has gotten beyond thinking less of women, we might think again. I felt frustrated and angry and then started casting about for someone to blame. Some enemy to focus my righteous indignation on, and here's a curious thing that started to

happen. I felt myself turning my anger toward the shelters whose beds were filled. Isn't that ridiculous? The impulse to find a scapegoat, probably to appease my own guilty conscience, is so strong that I'll blame the people who are actually doing what they can, because they're not doing enough. Anybody else here familiar with that unholy spirit?

I mention this because it really does feel like the polar opposite frame of mind than what we find in the book of Acts. And it needs to be said that the curious expectancy of the early Christians wasn't formed in a world that was freer of pain and injustice than ours. Herod had James killed with the sword and Peter had been thrown into prison. Paul and Silas will be imprisoned in the very next scene after what we read today. This was no Pollyanna hopefulness made possible by lives that had been insulated from cruelty and loss. But in spite of it all, the first followers of Jesus looked at the people in their world as bearers of gifts and possibility, not threats.

If a Macedonian dealer of purple cloth named Lydia walks into your life or mine, with what spirit will she be greeted? I truly believe that God cares infinitely more about the answer to that question than about the frequency of visions or whether we speak with the tongues of angels.

We talk pretty often here at Calvary about hospitality to the stranger. We do so in part because if you just let your Bible fall open and begin reading, you won't have to do so for long before someone is being reminded that they need to make room in their hearts and their lives for the one they'd been told to steer clear of. The foreigner, the alien. Sinners and the unclean. The imprisoned ones and the poor.

But when somebody walks into Calvary, I want them to experience more than a sense of grim religious obligation to make room for a visitor in the pew. I want them to feel the joyful expectancy of those first Christians. That sense that you, whoever you are, whatever your story… you are a container of buried treasure we can't wait to discover with you. That holy spirit of curiosity and wonder between human lives is the spirit God cares most deeply about, don't you think? That open hearted spirit of friendship is surely where the risen Christ still lives.

The spirit of scarcity and threat drove the world of Herod and Caesar and it remains the driving spirit of ours, I'm afraid. We are taught from before we can talk back to the world that there's only so much to go around. That our project is to get ahead of other people, defend our own, protect what we have from those who are coming to take it away. Friends, go back and read the stories again. Nothing could be further from the spirit of the crucified one and the first followers of his way than such a mindset.

So, for all the hardship and need we see and experience, let's commit to being a community that tends to its joy and its curiosity. Which means we not only learn together and pray together and serve together, but that we also eat and drink together, sing and laugh together, rejoice in all the ways we can together. Which maybe means

we heed Wendell Berry's sage advice. "…Every day do something/ that won't compute. Love the Lord./ Love the world. Work for nothing./ Take all that you have and be poor./ Love someone who does not deserve it/ …be joyful/though you have considered all the facts…" Such is the practice of resurrection.

The least surprising part of that story in Acts may be the way it ends. Lydia's heart opens up, and she and all her household are baptized. And then, Luke says, "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." The flow of grace turns around. Lydia looks at the apostles with the same curious, holy expectancy that they had for her, and invites them into her life. The winds of the Spirit, it seems, are picking up again, and blowing on, through her.