

AN OPEN DOOR

Today's passage from Acts tells of the start of the Christian witness in Europe. This was a monumental event--bringing the message of Christ to Europe, and we are heirs to this bold venture.

Paul and other believers had been active reaching out into Gentile area; however, the approach had mostly been through the Diaspora--the Jewish communities. They would go to the synagogue in various communities, such as Galatia, and proclaim the Gospel message. Once enough Jews were converted, then they would have the numbers to branch out to the Gentiles. The synagogue and local Jews would be their doorway for reaching out.

Yet, apparently, Philippi did not have a Jewish presence. There was no known connecting point / place to launch their ministry, and so going there could be perceived as invading trouble makers. The door to Europe seemed closed.

Nevertheless, Paul had a vision that a man in Macedonia, part of Europe, was begging him to come and "help us" -- "US--help us."

Inspired by the vision that God was calling him to go there to proclaim the Good news... and that people were waiting, Paul, Luke and others journeyed to Philippi -- to Europe.

They trusted things would work out.

They saw this as an opportunity.

Even so, when they arrived there, they were not greeted by a huge billboard that said, "Welcome Christian missionaries."

In fact, their first days in Europe were unassumingly quiet.

I can imagine them sitting in a motel room, feeling a bit intimidated by a new and strange place, and wondering, "Now what?,".... and ordering room service for all their meals.

Paul was likely thinking, "Where is that man from my vision who asked me to come here, and have these people never heard of 'farmer's sausage'?"

On the Sabbath, they decided to go search for people in prayer, likely hoping to find a Jew or two.

Apparently, it was common for such "spiritual" people to gather outside of town by the river.

There were people there, but they were Not Jews,... and...they were all women.

Things were different than expected, yet give them credit for their faith in trying, anyways.

They started talking with the women. A certain woman--who was a seeker / who worshipped a God she knew existed, but did not know, was moved by what they were saying.

God was responding to her search, and God opened her heart to clearly understand the Gospel message she was hearing.

Obviously, Paul and the others were sharing their faith / their testimony / their relationship with Christ to those strangers --those women.

Instead of a man, Lydia was God's open door to Europe.

Who could have imagined such a thing? Lydia was, of all things, a businesswoman,..... and not even from Philippi.

People and places came together in an amazing way for all. Lydia's heart was opened to understanding Christ, and she was baptized.

And, the ministry / the witness to Europe was now opening up, too.

Lydia invited the group to stay at her home. They had the necessary place and support to launch their ministry.

This is partly a story about,.....dare I say it? Evangelism

Paul and his group boldly, in faith, went out to a new area, in a new way..... to preach the Gospel message and to share their testimonies about what God meant to them.

This is doing the Great Commission.

People, especially those searching, need to hear HOW to connect with God, and they need to hear about Christ.

Words are necessary to explain such things, and there are people searching for answers / for help.

Moreover, disciples need to be cultivated and inspired, too.

Even so, words have their limitations, and they can become shallow/ empty without actions to give them depth.

Plus, words can be misused,.....as can evangelism. That happens when converting is the primary motivation, instead a loving respect and compassion for each person.

Jesus noted in the John 14 text that a right relationship with God requires not just knowing the message, but...keeping it / living and being the Gospel message. And, Love is imbued in the message, is the essence of the message,.. and gives life to the message.

To be sure, Christianity / the message of Christ spread..... mostly because of loving benevolence,.... not merely by convincing preaching or teaching.

For example:

In 165 CE, in the second century of Christianity, a small pox epidemic swept through the Roman Empire. Historian Rodney Stark says that a quarter to a third of the entire population died from it.

Marcus Aurelius speaks of caravans of carts and wagons hauling the dead from the cities. Whole villages in Italy were abandoned and 5,000 people a day died in Rome.

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, claimed that Christians had nothing to fear from the plague, saying, "We have begun gladly to seek martyrdom while we are learning not to fear death."

Bishop Dionysius wrote to Christians in Alexandria and said that the Christian way provided a prescription for action during this time of testing. He gave tribute to local Christians who lost their lives caring for others. Dionysius stated, "Many Christians, heedless of danger, took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in the name of Christ . . . in nursing and curing others, (they) transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead."

While non-Christians in these communities were abandoning their own families who had the sickness, Christians were caring for them at their own personal risk.

A century later, Emperor Julian began charity efforts in an attempt to match the Christians who were growing in number because of their care for people in need.

For the early Christian community in CE 165, doing what Jesus taught was apparently the norm. These Christians believed in doing and living "the word"--the way of Christ.

Rodney Stark says that modern medical experts claim that conscientious nursing of those suffering from the epidemic in 165, even without any medications, could have cut the mortality rate by two-thirds or even more.

Christians caring for each other and for the strangers and the sick during this epidemic likely resulted in the disproportionate growth of the Christian community.

We Mennonites do charity and service ministries well; however, sometimes we forget to use our words.

Nevertheless, today's message is not really about combining proclamation with loving, benevolent actions--doing the great commission and the great commandment.

The message is more about new possibilities, new directions ... about doors opening up.....the message is about having a vision.

When searching for a way out or for a new direction, if we suddenly see the way, then we often refer to that as a door opening before us.

Sometimes, it feels like God will call us to move / to go, even before God opens the door, as what seemed to happen with Paul going to Philippi.

Yet, I think the door was opened when Paul had his vision. He just couldn't see all the details at that point.

An open door allows us to see out / to see the way to leave where we are, which could be to venture to a new place or way.

A vision is what is seen beyond where we are. It is like looking through an open door,.....that beckons us to proceed.

We did not read the Revelation 21/22 text, but it is printed in your bulletin. The passage presents a vision.

A vision of a new, very different holy place for people. A open and inviting city where the gates are never closed.

No longer will there be the dread of darkness. God will light the way.

And, people will not go hungry, and they will find healing there, too.

Moreover, in the vision, the old ways are gone. The old ways of worshipping God had ended--there was no temple / no centre of worship. Instead, all will directly worship God.... with the wonder and awareness of knowing Christ.

The vision is of a wonderful and grand place / a right and just condition for humanity with God and God's creation.

What that vision far fetched, impossible, futile and delusional dreaming? ?????

Visions tend to spark / inspire passion and desire, and..... yes,.... nothing happens without movement.

Paul would have never gone to Europe, ifhe didn't go to Europe. He followed his vision.

A vision is like looking through an open door, and the impossible remains impossible.....if we remain where we are.

A few months ago, we were asked by the church council to write down and share our vision for the church.

Few responded, and most of the responses were about an improved temple..... or other modest alterations.

Maybe that's it for us--tweak this and fix that.

I hope not.

Maybe the door's shut?

Yet, I refuse to believe God is leaving us alone.

So, what is our vision from here?

What do we see from the middle of Osler?

Perhaps, we should rise up to a metaphorical mountain to get a better look,..... but that may take a lot of arduous praying, ????

What do we see in Osler?

Can we see Warman from here? There are thousands of people in Warman, and I bet there are a few searchers in that group ...or ... people who need help.

And, what about Saskatoon? Or,..... do we have to have a limited vision,.... and obey the old rules and stay who we were?

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What is our vision? Who, what and where is God calling us?

Christianity could have remained a Jewish flavoured sect in the middle East.

But, it didn't because Christians had a vision and a passion.... and a devotion that enabled them to move through the open door.

To be sure, they were filled and lead by the Holy Spirit.

Many scholars have declared that we are entering a Post-Christian era.

That maybe troubling, yet..... it is also rich with opportunity.

The way things used to be are over. They're not coming back.

They were good, but they're gone.

Even so, God is still opening doors and giving visions to those willing to look forward.

Lydia was a delightful surprise, and God has good things in store for us, too.....when we respond and become part of God's vision for us.

We must look for the open door, and prayerfully gaze on what lies ahead.

They say that the key to successfully walking a tightrope is focussing on where you need to go.

We will go where our vision lies, and looking down is not a good option.

God is calling us.

God is redeeming / saving us with a vision for today and tomorrow.

And now, the first step.....