

Acts 15:36-16:10 GUIDANCE

SERIES: THE GREAT ADVENTURE

By Steve Zeisler

Last Sunday, with a number of us gathered around, more than a dozen folks were baptized in the pool on the patio. Those who were baptized gave their testimonies. Some spoke of failed efforts at religion. One came to Christ from a spiritual void. Another woman grew up in this church, left for twenty-five years, came back to Christ, and came back here to be baptized. One woman's husband watched in tears as his prayers were answered in her new faith. Some non-Christian family members of one man being baptized were observing intently, trying to be supportive of new life they didn't yet understand. Some had found Christ amid fear and brokenness, others with a dawning gratitude that God had been so good that he deserved to be thanked and worshiped.

It was wonderful to be in the presence of vital new faith and to hear new expressions of faith. I read this text from Romans 6:4 as we were preparing for baptism: "Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." But the question is, how do we hold on to newness of life when it is not breaking news anymore? Many of us have walked with Christ for years, and even though "His compassions are new every morning" (Lamentations 3:23), they don't always feel that way. How do we learn to experience vital resurrection faith not only this week but next week, next month, and over years of time?

To find an answer to this question, we will do well to turn to the book of Acts. In the accounts of the early church's trying to live out a faith that was not brand-new any more, moving from the discovery of an empty tomb to a life of discipleship, we will learn of the presence and purpose of Jesus in our lives.

The record of the second missionary journey of Paul is a favorite passage of mine. I have often returned to these texts in trying to understand what it means to have faith and then what it means to be a leader in Jesus' church. I preached on this material in 1996, and if you want to do some additional reading, you can look at Discovery Papers 4482-4489.

Let me set the context very briefly. The book of Acts begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome. It has been understood by scholars as the journey from Jerusalem to Rome, discovering that Jesus was not only the Messiah of the Jews, but indeed the Savior of the world. It begins with a focus primarily on Peter and others who surround Peter; in the second half of the book the focus moves to the story of Paul and those who surround him in his ministry. The earliest Christians believed that they were witnesses to something remarkable. They bore witness to the truth before everyone they encountered. As they matured they came to understand that they were not just witnesses but missionaries; they were no longer just responding to questions as they were asked, but they were taking both the questions and the answers, the story of Christ, to people who needed his love but didn't even know they needed it.

We're picking up in the middle of that section where some in the cause of Christ are being sent out, blown by the wind of the Spirit to new territory. Paul's second missionary journey begins in Antioch, and toward the end of chapter 18 it will end back in Antioch again, as did the first missionary journey. Acts 15:36-16:10:

And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which

we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.” Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees, which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.

They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a certain man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Although this will turn out to be a remarkable journey, the beginning was quite ordinary. The time signature “after some days” doesn’t give us any sense that this was an important moment. It wasn’t Passover or Pentecost. The Roman Empire was not at a critical point in its history. It was in the most by-the-way manner that Paul said to Barnabas, “Why don’t we go back and visit the places we went to before?”

They immediately got in an argument, which I’ll come back to, and ended up going different directions. But the intention behind these trips was to return to familiar territory. Barnabas and Mark went to Cyprus, and shortly thereafter Paul and Silas went off to southern Galatia on the mainland. Presumably they thought they would visit friends and then return. Paul and Silas were carrying a very important letter that had been written by the apostles at the Council of Jerusalem, helping resolve tension between Christian Jews and Gentiles.

But partway through the trip, for no reason we can discern, the travelers headed north and traveled for four hundred miles with doors being slammed in their faces all along the way. Once they get to Philippi, which is where we will pick up in the next message, things will begin to happen that are exciting and world-changing. At one point on this trip they will be called “these men who have upset the world” (17:6), and rightly so. They will go to regions where the gospel has not been and establish churches in important cities. Those churches will evangelize their regions. Paul will begin writing letters that will come to form the heart of the New Testament, letters that are crucial to our faith. Paul and his friends will encounter every form of opposition and speak the gospel in every possible wonderful, thoughtful way. It will be a marvelous trip. They thought they were going on a short trip; it will last two and a half years. They had no idea what they were getting themselves into in the proposal to pay a visit to friends.

Remember how the first missionary journey started? It had greater drama. The leaders of the church in Antioch were meeting (Acts 13:2-3): “While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.” A moment of holy quiet came over them. The Spirit spoke. They fasted and prayed, laid hands on Paul and Barnabas, and sent them out. God announced that he had set them apart for this work. Nothing like that occurs in the beginning of the second missionary journey, and yet this will be a longer, more dangerous, more wonderful, and more world-altering journey.

As we think of our journey of faith, what kind of insight can we gain from this beginning? For one thing, people

like these in ordinary circumstances can be led by the Spirit without evidence that he is doing so. Such folks care about the things God cares about. They remember their friends, express concern for the needy. They act with God-given wisdom, and the world changes.

The other day I was in a coffee shop I don't go to very often, and a couple of women I know were there, one of whom goes to our church. Their heads were bent toward each other, and they were deep in conversation. I went by and said hello, and they said they were talking about what God is up to. As I got my coffee and walked on, I prayed, "Lord, let them hear what you have to say."

Now, this coffee shop in Palo Alto was not a religious environment, and all manner of noisy things were going on around them. They were just two friends having a conversation about the things of the Lord. They may well have been sorrowing over some who are suffering, because God feels that way in his heart for those who suffer. God seeks out prodigals who are lost, who have wandered away and are making a mess of their life in some far country; sometimes we meet together and talk and pray for folks like that. Sometimes we may even go search for prodigals who need someone to come get them. These women might have been discussing the needs of the young or the poor. They might have been angry at barriers to love that are raised between believing people and the rest of the world. Christian friends might talk about what it is like to be merciful to those who need mercy, remembering that some are sick and some are in prison.

We might have conversations like that without any evidence that the Spirit of God has descended from heaven. There is no holy darkness surrounding us; there is no certainty that anything other than our conversation is taking place. But couldn't it be that ordinary people like us would decide to take a trip or start a Bible study or go to a hospital or meet together to support in prayer those who are journeying to some other place, and who knows where it would lead to? Most of today's most vital churches started as a small group of people meeting together to study the Bible and care about each other, in many cases not even trying to become a church.

If you are a fan of J. R. R. Tolkien, as a lot of us are, it is worth remembering that it wasn't the wizards and the elves who saved Middle Earth. It was the hobbits—small, unimportant, unobserved by most of the great powers of Middle Earth—who changed everything by their faithfulness, courage, obedience, and simplicity.

I have told this story before. I am convinced that Leslie and I are married (for thirty-two years now) because of a plane trip that took place my junior year in college. I was part of a team of folks who had been invited by the leadership at a college in Oregon to come up and have some evangelistic meetings for the week of spring break. For some reason I can't recall, I missed the car trip, so I was going to fly to Portland.

Leslie, who was living in the East Bay, was going to school in Seattle, and she was on the same plane, which was supposed to stop over in Portland and then fly on to Seattle. We were friends, but not more than that. We got on this plane, and God appointed a fog in Portland, so the plane couldn't land. The Portland passengers had to go on to Seattle. I couldn't get any transportation out of Seattle for twenty-four hours. Leslie and I spent that time together. We took walks and talked and shared life and told jokes. I met some of her friends. When the twenty-four hours were up I made it to Portland and joined the ministry team. I assumed that the conversations I would have in Oregon were the reason God sent me on the trip, but I am sure now that bringing Leslie and me together was his intention, though it was impossible to see at the time.

Let me make some further observations about this text. There is a lot more to encourage us here. I want to introduce to you six people who are identified. One of them is Luke himself. Verse 10 says, "When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia...." Luke has been writing in the third person all along until this point. When he writes in the first person, we realize that he is now in the story, although he never names himself. We can appreciate that he is now an eyewitness of events.

Another person is Silas, whom I will discuss in another message, so we will skip over him for the moment.

Four other people are mentioned by name: Barnabas, John Mark, Paul, and Timothy. Each of them has identifiable flaws and inadequacies as we meet them here.

Paul and Barnabas got in a fight, and the Greek term makes it very clear they were angry. They both knew better. Their stubbornness was serious and potentially divisive. Now, God redeemed the argument because two different journeys were undertaken; he made something positive out of a mess, but it was a mess. Can pigheaded people with bad tempers who don't listen very well, who have ego problems, be used by God? It turns out they can. Therefore people like us, who are frequently pigheaded, who don't listen very well, can be used by God.

John Mark is noted for youthful cowardice. Later he will write one of the gospels, the book of Mark. He is going to serve God all his life and be held in high esteem by the church of his day. But at this moment Paul is focused on his failure.

Timothy came from a broken family. His father had apparently abandoned the family when he was young. Not only that, his father had prevented him from being circumcised and taking his place among other Jewish men. He grew up with the effects of those things. We are very familiar in our day and age with the effects of fatherlessness, especially on young men.

Having Timothy circumcised was a very curious thing for Paul to do, especially considering that when this took place he was just about to write the book of Galatians, which is furious in its insistence that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised, or become Jews, to please God. So why would Paul do this? Briefly, the answer is that it was strategic for ministry. Timothy's faith was already complete. God would not love him any more, or use him any more, and he would not be included in the fellowship any more, if he were circumcised. But in evangelism he could go places as a circumcised Jew that he could not go otherwise. In Jewish settings, he would be more accepted, his voice heard.

The second thing that I think is in this story, although it is fairly subtle, is that Timothy needed a father, and Paul would welcome a son. I think that in a wonderful way God gave these two to each other. Timothy now had a father who acted like a father should, making sure that he had all the rights, privileges, standing, and respect that went with being Jewish, giving Timothy what he had lost out on. And Paul, who lamented missing out on family life, gained a son.

In this church we too have folks with dysfunctional families, folks who were raised without fathers and who are struggling to figure things out. We have folks who have failed in courage, who have come up to a hard thing and run away, and hated themselves for it. We have people with bad tempers. If people like Paul and John Mark and Timothy can be used in ministry that is important to God, folks like us can be used, too, and that ought to encourage us.

Let me also make some observations about positive ministry choices. One is servant-heartedness. The original intention was to return to encourage their friends, and to deliver the letter from the Jerusalem council that they now carried. As they traveled, they strengthened the churches. They went with a heart of service. Too often we are aware of campaigns mounted by Christians that are more about ego than anything else. Great sums of money are raised, and high-powered people with flashy credentials and big entourages go out and accomplish big things and take credit for everything. But there is none of that here. These travelers simply went to serve. That heart of service ought to encourage us.

The second thing we can observe is that they believed in team ministry. Even though Paul and Barnabas split up, neither one of them went out alone. And this was not only team ministry, but training of the young. Paul and Barnabas both believed in taking along these interns (Timothy and John Mark, respectively) who weren't yet experienced and dependable. They could see a future for them. An important responsibility of Christian leaders is to be looking for who is coming along next, training the next generation.

One last observation has to do with God's saying, "No." We're told they got to regions they had been to before: Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium. It was an overland trip from Antioch to those regions, and the road was fairly good. But we're told that inexplicably, they turned north. They didn't go to all the places they had been before, only about half of them. They traveled north for four hundred miles in difficult conditions—mountainous, difficult terrain. As they trekked along, at one point they tried to go into Galatia, and they were forbidden by the Spirit. They went farther north and tried to go into Bithynia: "No!" They were forbidden, and this is expressed in very strong language. The door to their efforts was slammed shut by the Spirit of Jesus. There was no opportunity for ministry.

They finally got to Troas, and there Paul had a vision: "Come to Macedonia." The next verse will see them off to Philippi in Macedonia. Great things happen in Philippi. Philippi is where God wants them. They are going to face hard opposition and miraculous deliverance. They will found a great church. Philippi is where they are supposed to be.

This text suggests a question, however. Antioch was a seaport, and Philippi would be reached by sea, so why wouldn't God intervene to send a team to Philippi from Antioch? Paul and Barnabas wouldn't have had their fight. And notice that we don't know *how* the Spirit forbade the missionaries to enter these areas. It wasn't as if they were unwilling to go to hard places. They weren't unwilling to go where they weren't going to be welcomed. Yet for some reason the Lord impressed on them, "No, no, no, no," before they heard, "Yes."

I think it is helpful to know that we can't explain this. What we do know is that God is very often forming his ministers for his ministry. Maybe they weren't ready yet for what they were going to face. Maybe they didn't love each other enough yet, and they had to be together and trek four hundred miles in order to learn to love each other. Maybe they had to learn to pray. Maybe they had to learn other lessons. God knows. It is not true that a lack of instant success means that you are not in the right place doing the right thing.

If new life is going to stay vital, if we are going to have fresh encounters with the Lord, in large measure it is going to be because he says, "Follow me," and we say, "Yes." What makes life vibrant and encounters with Christ frequent is taking one step forward and seeing what he has next, hearing his voice and then discovering him in new people and new places and new adventures. Don't let anyone tell you you don't qualify, or you're not good enough. Don't settle for shallow comfort zones. Jesus is changing the world and we have the privilege of joining with him.

Scripture quotations are taken from New American Standard Bible, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Catalog No. 4766
Acts 15:36-16:10
26th Message
Steve Zeisler
April 18, 2004