

**Pastor Jonna Bohigian**  
**Obedience, Suffering, and Joy**  
Acts 16:6 – 12, 16 – 40

Last week, we encountered the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10. We heard the vision Peter received, claiming that nothing that God has made clean is unclean. *Everything that God has made clean is unclean. All people* are to receive the good news of Jesus, not just the Jews. And so the good news of Jesus spread, just as Jesus commanded his disciples in Acts 1 – to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

In our Scripture readings today, we jump to Acts 16, 6 chapters ahead of where we were last week. Here's a little recap of what came in-between: 1. Other Christian Jews come to accept the Gentiles, or non-Jewish Christians. 2. Peter is imprisoned by Herod and saved by an angel. 3. Herod is killed by an angel. 4. The church in Antioch (modern-day Syria), is told to send Saul and his companion, Barnabas. 5. Saul and Barnabas have a successful first missionary journey, though they encounter serious rejection and punishment. 6. The church has a debate over the necessity of circumcision, and determines that the Jewish practice of circumcision is not necessary, because each person is saved by grace. There is no reason to make conversion more difficult for non-Jews. 7. And, Saul and Barnabas' missionary partnership is broken up over a dispute. There is a lot more that happens, but these are the highlights.

It is almost unbelievable to read about this man named Saul, otherwise known as Paul. From primary persecutor of the church to the greatest evangelist of the gospel and recipient of extreme persecution. Amazingly, his first missionary

journey and subsequent fallout with Barnabas didn't dissuade him from going out again.

In chapter 16, we read that Paul goes on a second missionary journey, and takes new companions with him – Silas, Timothy, and a fourth who appears to be the author of this book, Luke. (map) As you can see on this map, they cover quite some distance. Paul and Silas begin in Antioch (modern-day Syria). They travel to Derbe and Lystra (modern-day Turkey), where they meet Timothy. They go to Troas, where they likely pick up Luke. Then they travel to Philippi, which is in modern-day Greece.

But their journey isn't all so simple and direct. Let's get into the text here, beginning with verse 6. (slide) It says, "Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them."

Paul and his companions are blocked *twice* from entering areas with which they wanted to share the good news of Jesus. Acts doesn't tell us *how* or *why* they are blocked, but the Spirit prevents them from going to these areas of modern-day Turkey. It seems odd that the Spirit would prevent the gospel from being shared *anywhere*. Wouldn't God *want* the good news to be shared with *everyone*, to the ends

of the earth? Common sense might tell us that there is no wrong place or wrong time to share the gospel, but what may seem like common sense to *us* may be in *direct contradiction* with the movement of the Spirit. “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (Jn 3:8).

But Paul and his companions are not simply given a closed door. In verse 9, Paul receives a “vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’”

If you are new to the Christian faith, or are unsure if you have ever heard God’s voice, this passage gives us a clue. Often, the voice of the Spirit is not linear or a response that we expected; it is more like the wind, which blows how it pleases.

The linear direction would have been for me to pursue a master’s in counseling. My professors urged me to pursue a master’s right after graduating, because I might not be motivated to go back to school after having had a break. But I didn’t resonate with this encouragement. I couldn’t imagine myself as a counselor, as much as I valued that line of work. I went away for a complete change of scenery, to clear my head and to receive a new vision for my future. I taught English in the Czech Republic for two years, and determined that it was time to come back home and begin the next chapter in my life.

It was 2009. The Great Recession had commenced, and I was in the same boat as many, scrambling to find employment – *any* kind of employment. I finally got a job at a Starbucks, not very close to home. I was frustrated that I had returned home, and still had *no clue* what I was supposed to do. I looked back over my life,

and thought that maybe youth ministry was what God was calling me into. I found part-time work at a Lutheran church not far from the Starbucks. The problem was, I felt that I didn't know what in the *world* I was teaching these kids! I had often heard, *Fake it 'til you make it*, but faking it can only take you so far. You can't *fake* spiritual maturity, and you can't *fake* understanding Scripture.

I came home to my parents and said with gusto, "I know what I want to do. I don't want to study counseling; I want to study ministry. I want to go to seminary, to a brick-and-mortar school, and I want to go now. But I can't think of *how* that can happen. I'm in Fresno now, and I don't believe that I should leave my job at the church."

My dad replied, "You know? There's a seminary in Fresno, and I've heard good things about it. It's not a *Lutheran* seminary, but maybe you should check it out."

I didn't think much about that conversation until the next day at Starbucks. A man came up to me, and said, "You don't know me, but I know you. My name is Mark Baker, and I am a professor at the seminary here in Fresno. You should come. Here's my card."

I don't know if I actually looked up at the ceiling and said, "God?!" but I definitely had that internal conversation. I had never before had an experience like this, so I thought that this must have been my imagination; God wasn't calling me to go to this seminary. I felt skeptical for about a week, and then thought that I had nothing to lose, so I gave Mark a call.

Like U2's song, the Spirit moves in mysterious ways. Sometimes, it will be as blatant as Mark's invitation to seminary, and at other times, it will be more subtle, like a thought that suddenly sweeps across your mind, and perhaps doesn't even answer a question you were asking. And what is sometimes just as mysterious as the voice of the Spirit, is the outcome.

Paul and his companions obey the vision and go to Macedonia. They have success in Philippi with a woman named Lydia, and she and her entire household become believers. They go to others in the city, preaching the good news of Jesus. They encounter a slave girl, who is oppressed by a spirit. In the Greek, this girl is described as having a "python" spirit. This spirit was attributed to the god Apollos, who was "associated with the giving of [predictions]," and "worshiped as the 'Pythian god'" in Greece.<sup>1</sup> This slave girl is immensely valuable to her owners because of her ability to tell fortunes.

Day after day, she follows Paul and his companions, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved" (Acts 16: 17b)! She gets to be so annoying, that in his frustration, Paul finally *casts* the spirit out of her.

The girl is freed from the spirit, and her owners are *angry!* Their source of income is now gone, and all because of these itinerant *Jews!* They should be put into prison because they are upsetting the Philippian way of life! They didn't ask for *permission* before *assaulting* another's property and causing sources of income to shrivel up. They need to be put away with!

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<sup>1</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 312.

Paul and Silas are severely beaten and imprisoned. This outcome is likely *not* what they envisioned when Paul shared about the man calling them to Macedonia to help!

It is easy to believe that when suffering comes, it is a result of not hearing the Spirit correctly or of being punished for sin. Suffering *may* be a consequence of sin or of going down the wrong path, but sometimes, it is a result of being *obedient*.

As American Christians, this goes *counter* to our expectation. We expect that *if* we are obedient to God, we *will* receive good things as a result. Good for good, and evil for evil. We try to give a reason for our suffering, so that we can avoid it the next time. We want life to make *sense* and to frankly not *be* so hard. We work so hard, and we *just* want to be rewarded! But unfortunately for us, we can't always attribute (left to right) evil from evil and good from good.

Amazingly, this is *not* the rabbit trail that Paul and Silas follow. No, they pray and sing hymns to God! They are bound in stocks in the innermost part of the prison, aching in their limbs, and they *praise* God! They have seen the mighty hand of God at work in Philippi, and they trust that they have been called here to help the people.

At midnight, a violent earthquake loosens everyone's chains and every door flies open. The jailer, recognizing that he has failed to do his duty, tries to kill himself. But Paul calls out, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" (Acts 16:28). Miraculously, *everyone* had the opportunity to escape, but *no one* did. The jailer, like everyone else, had been listening to Paul and Silas praying and singing hymns to God, and *he knows that they know* the key to salvation. "Sirs, what must I do to be

saved?' [he asks]. They [reply], 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household'" (Acts 16:30b – 31). Paul and Silas teach the man and his *whole household* about Jesus. The jailer washes their wounds, and they baptize him and his entire household. The Church Father, John Chrysostom, wrote, The jailer "washed and was washed...he washed them from their stripes, and was himself washed from his sins."<sup>2</sup>

Like for Paul and Silas, the Spirit's voice will not always follow common sense, and it may lead us to a time of suffering. We know this, not simply because of the life of Paul, but because we follow the One who was obedient to the Father in every way, yet "he was despised and rejected...a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem" (Isa 53:3). But "for the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God" (Heb 12:2b).

*He* is the One we follow – not a famous or successful man, but a God-man who was *hated* because he upset the powerful and was understood by the marginalized. And when we obediently follow his Spirit, the powerful *will be* upset and the marginalized *will* understand. He turns everything *upside down*, and our obedience, though it may lead us to suffer now, will bring joy, *abundant* joy! Amen!

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce, 318.