

Today's scripture passage has all the makings of a romantic Hollywood movie. Imagine it through the eyes of a movie director.

The Apostle Paul, somewhat short in stature, exudes confidence in spite of a slight handicap – possibly poor eyesight. He seems to know what he wants in life and is not afraid to go after it. His plans to go to Bithynia in Asia, have already been thwarted twice. It is “as if” someone or something is preventing him from going to Asia. We know it to be the Holy Spirit since we are privy to the background story. After hearing of the “call from the man in Macedonia” during his dream, or vision, his traveling companions announce “Forget Asia, we are going to Macedonia with you.” They realize the man's urgent message comes from the opposite direction they have been trying to go. They also realize it must be a message from God because God takes us in directions we weren't planning on going, sometimes to places we don't want to go.

Paul and his friends leave Asia sailing across the beautiful Mediterranean waters of the Aegean Sea towards Europe. How will they locate the man in the vision? How receptive will the Macedonians be to the good news of Jesus Christ? After all, Macedonians are used to the conquering armies of King Alexander that spread the Greek culture and language along with lots of bloodshed from Egypt to India. Will they be receptive to the freedom Jesus Christ offers, not through domination, but through love? Can they expect to be jailed again? Beaten? What lies ahead?

A storm at sea could begin to brew just to increase suspense – will they even reach their destination?

Arriving in Philippi, Paul and Silas discover there are not enough Jewish people to build and maintain a synagogue, even though Philippi is a decent sized city. Early on the Sabbath, they go looking for devout Jews they can talk with about Jesus Christ. Surely they will find them gathered for prayer somewhere. They do find a group of women, including Lydia, who gather regularly for prayer by the river. Lydia, is a “seller of purple goods, which makes her a wealthy woman with a wealthy clientele--the only ones able to afford the expensive cloth she sells. It takes 250,000 sea mollusks giving up their “ink” to make one ounce of the purple dye used to dye cloth

purple. No wonder purple cloth is so expensive -- someone has to crack open all those mollusks. That is the production Lydia is in charge of. She is a woman of means. She is also described as a “worshiper of God” even though she is Gentile. She is a seeker seeking to learn more of God.

If Hollywood were telling this love story, Paul and Lydia would spot each other across the way while music rose to a crescendo, two star-crossed lovers whose paths finally cross. But this is a love story, not between Paul and Lydia, but between them and God. Paul and Lydia each do their part but it is God guiding and working through them and all things that makes their meeting possible. Paul wanted to go in the opposite direction. He would not be here if it weren't for his obedience to God and willingness to go where God leads. Lydia would not be here if she weren't already worshipping God, longing after God. This “chance” encounter happens because the Holy Spirit brought Paul to Lydia so she could hear the good news and then the Holy Spirit opens her heart to receive and understand it. Lydia's longing and God's love meet there at the riverside. There by the river, the God she seeks finds her. This is a divine love story.

After receiving God's love, Lydia immediately shares it as hospitality inviting Paul and his missionary companions to stay in her home. The good news is shared with her entire household and they are also baptized. Lydia's home becomes something of a base of operations for the missionaries during their time in her city and also a house church since she already has a gathering of "the brothers and sisters there." God's love story to the world continues as Paul and Silas preach the good news and Lydia uses her home and economic resources to fund their mission trip. By hosting the missionaries, she becomes one of them, a new convert engaged in converting others. We can only imagine how many heard the good news while gathered at Lydia's house. (Pause.)

The action of the Holy Spirit intrigues me most in this passage. It has been said “when one door closes, another opens.” Twice the Holy Spirit shut the door on Paul's going to Asia, redirecting him to Macedonia (modern day Greece). The upshot is that the Christian message lands in Europe and begins to spread.

The Holy Spirit seems to act as “prompter in this play” inviting people to listen to directions in this ongoing drama, that is at its heart a love story because God wants a personal relationship with each one of us. A love relationship that will spill God’s love out into the world.

We become involved in this love story, similar to Paul, as we listen for nudges from the Holy Spirit. Have you experienced such a nudge from the Holy Spirit? A nudge to reconcile with an estranged friend, to let a business acquaintance know you are praying for them, to do something kind for someone. How does one discern where God is leading? Through listening to God, paying attention to the roadblocks and redirecting one’s route accordingly. It is oftentimes a vague and somewhat ambiguous roadmap. How we yearn for a divine GPS system for our lives! Today’s story offers another clue in reading God’s roadmap for our lives--that of being involved in a community also seeking God’s direction. Lydia gathered with a religious community as she sought after God – their prayers most likely sustained her as she waited to personally meet God. Gathered together as a community, they receive the good news just as we gather to hear the good news together every Sunday. This community upholds us, prays for us, cares and sustains us as we discern God’s direction for our lives as individuals and as a community of faith. And God’s love story to the world continues through the actions and words of our lives.

How is God continuing this love story through you? Where might God be leading you to share the good news? Not sure? Then this is the community in which to continue to wait, pray and discern your next steps. May God bless us and guide us as we continue to share God’s love story. Amen.