May 26th, 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Sixth Sunday of Eastertide

10:30 am

A Gospel for All People

1. To Talk of Visions

In 1992, at a public lecture at Princeton Theological Seminary, George Gallup, from the famous Gallup polls, shared some interesting statistics. He polled Presbyterians, asking them if they had ever experienced a vision from God, and half of the church members said yes. The percentage was even higher amongst the clergy.

Now I can’t speak to Gallup’s methodology of poll-taking – but I found it interesting that Presbyterians shared that they experienced visions, because when we talk about vision, we often hear that language used in other denominations – perhaps more evangelical denominations. Presbyterians, in the grand scheme, have an integral sense of being very intellectual and grounded to research, so for Presbyterians to admit that they’ve seen visions – something that is unpredictable and unexplainable by study – seems profound.

How do you begin talking about visions? What does a vision look like, or feel like? I don’t think I’d naturally use the word vision, but I have had profound experiences where I have felt God’s call on my heart or moments of absolute certainty in God’s faithfulness. Sometimes they are big moments, sometimes seemingly small, but all the same – important nudges on the Spirit’s behalf.

One of the visions that I have had was my very first week as a hospital chaplain, working on a unit. I remember being terrified of this cold call – this idea of knocking on a door and asking someone if they wanted to talk or if they needed prayer. It felt, almost too proselytizing at first, it felt vulnerable, and at times along the chaplain journey, it continued to feel that way. Yet the first week on a unit, I was tucked into a corner hallway, fiddling with my thumbs, trying to find some way to get out of this call, when I heard a woman softly crying in her corner room. I turned, I knocked, I asked her if I could come in. We didn’t exchange many words to my recollection, but she asked me to pray for her, and so I did. I came to see her the next day and I acutely remember her saying, “If that was the only thing you did in ministry, you’ve done your job well.” God called me out of my comfort zone, into a transformative place, into a place where my vision, or really, my hearing of cries, called me to something more. If we listen closely, if we have open hearts – maybe these are the stories we should be telling one another.

To the best of my ability, I try to follow the call of this vision or this transformation, into the place that God longs for me to be. I try to remain open, so God can do a good work in me. I doubt I am the only one who has these visions, if you will – and again, it makes me wonder, if we were vulnerable and daring enough to share these visions – what would change in us and through us?

II. Sharing Visions

Reading our lesson this moment, I consider Lydia’s vision and her profoundly open heart as a gentile seeking a Jewish God. She was a dealer in purple cloth – which may not sound like a big deal, but it is – it tells us that she is an independent woman in a world ruled by men. She is able to run her own business and have full command on her property. We hear about Lydia’s household, but we don’t hear even a mention of her husband’s name, presuming she had a husband. The focal point, unusually, is a woman.

Lydia is a good mash up of Mary and Martha – she’s both reflective and contemplative, but she’s also a busy woman with a busy schedule – and she somehow seems to navigate that balance. What is also wonderful about Lydia is that her heart is wide open – and that’s a clear message to both you and me – if we are to receive a vision, if we are going to make any impact, if we are going to transform – we must live with a heart wide open. Sometimes that heart wide open means that we will get hurt, but it also opens us up to possibilities beyond our comprehension.

Lydia was open, and in that openness, found herself at the riverside, where Paul was also led. Let us also note that this was completely a God moment – the Spirit intervened here – Lydia was led as a seeker to this place of prayer and we know through other Scripture readings in Acts, there were many roadblocks for Paul to actually get to this riverside place of prayer. Paul had a vision of his own – for Phillipi wasn’t on their route, but he saw a man from Macedonia who was pleading for him to come to the waters and help them. Paul listened to the vision, re-directed his route, and found himself by the waterside. The fact that they could meet was Spirit-led.

And then, in what I have to assume is a much larger narrative, Lydia and her family hear Paul, get baptized, and says, basically – ‘Come and stay at my home, and use it as an outpost for ministry in Phillipi.’ By many traditions, Lydia was considered the first documented European convert. And in that conversion, God opened her heart and she opened her home.

III. A Gospel for All

If we were to look through other parts of the book of Acts, you’ll find other women who led the first century church with integrity, energy, and command. You’ll find men and unexpected figures who sense visions and hear a call and transform through the centuries into what we know as the church today. The Gospel, the very good news of Jesus Christ, as we see in the story of Lydia and other stories along the way, is a message for all people.

A favourite quote, from Rachel Held Evans, speaks to this Gospel of all, when she says, “The folks you’re shutting out of the church today will be leading it tomorrow. That’s how the Spirit works. The future is in the margins.” I would also add – as we recognize our Christian history, we’ve also see that the Spirit always works in the margins and continues to – from Moses who was shy of speech, from 1st century folks like Lydia, the unexpected purple cloth trader to people who enter in our lives and surprise us with their wisdom.

The fact that God calls the unusual to unusual calls means that we need to remain open. I’m not asking for you to be naïve, but to be truly open to listening more than speaking. When someone approaches us, telling us of a vision, what if we weren’t to blow it off as absurd, but listen, just listen, to see what God is doing within their hearts. And I promise you, these moments will be at really inconvenient times, which means we have to be even more intentional. You will find these moments to connect when you are trying to rush to get out of the grocery store, or when you have an appointment that you need to get to, or a call that pops up on your phone when you are headed out the door. Lydia’s open heart and her balance of a busy life reminds us that we also need to have an open heart and to manage and navigate our busy lives while still hearing God’s call.

IV. An Open Heart

Today, may you remember to have an open heart, and let that sense of openness continue in the days to come. May you remember that you might be Lydia, a seeker on the way, called to something unusual. May you remember that you might be like Paul, called to listen to a vision or a plea and set off on another route. May you remember that these encounters remind us again and again that the good news is for all of God’s people, in every place and every time. And so, with that open heart, may we rejoice for a Gospel for all people, everyday and in every way. Amen.