

**Opened the Heart**

May 22, 2022

**Acts 16:9-15**

<sup>9</sup> During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." <sup>10</sup> When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. <sup>11</sup> We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, <sup>12</sup> and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. <sup>13</sup> On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup> A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. <sup>15</sup> When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

**John 14:23-29**

<sup>23</sup> Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. <sup>24</sup> Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine but is from the Father who sent me. <sup>25</sup> "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. <sup>26</sup> But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

*<sup>27</sup> Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. <sup>28</sup> You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. <sup>29</sup> And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.*

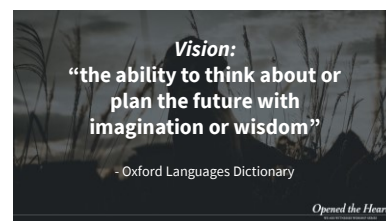


Last Sunday we dove into Peter's vision and the impact of that vision. God declared that what God had made was clean, opening the way for the Gentiles to be added to the family of God. Today we jump ahead five chapters in the book of Acts, to another vision and to another way that God opened the hearts of people in order to further grow the family of faith. Again, we see the Holy Spirit leading and guiding. Again, we see followers of God faithfully responding to the voice or nudge of the Spirit.

When we turn to the scriptures over and over, we hear again and again that God is always here, always speaking and nudging, always seeking to deepen our relationship, always desiring to draw us closer and closer to Christ. Even though we know all of this to be true, the questions for us and for most Christians are these: how do we hear the voice of God? In the midst of all of the other voices that fill our ears and minds and hearts, how do we discern God's voice and understand what God is saying to us? For Peter last week and for Paul this week, it was rather clear that God was speaking. I hope that we too would recognize an audible voice from above!

Even though that is clearly not the norm anymore, God still speaks to us. Sometimes that happens here on a Sunday morning – whether in the message, or in a song, or in a prayer, or in Sunday school or at youth group, or even in a conversation around a table in Fellowship Hall. Sometimes it happens in those still quiet moments at home in the early morning or afternoon or evening – whenever you spend time alone with God. Sometimes it happens as we are talking with a neighbor or friend or new acquaintance. There are many ways that God speaks to us. Or maybe I should say tries to speak to us. The reality, my friends, is that although God still speaks, we do not always listen. This is true for me, and I am pretty sure that it is true for you too. So, we must not only open our heart to the voice of God, but we also must cultivate a determination to listen. As we turn to Acts 16, we turn to a passage that helps us to see how to both hear and listen. As we do so, let us pray...

Today's passage from Acts 16 begins with a vision. The word "vision" is one used both in the Bible and in the secular world. The Oxford Languages online dictionary defines vision this way: *"the ability to think about or plan the future with imagination or wisdom."* This is a good real-world definition of vision. The best and brightest CEOs and leaders have a wonderful ability to cast vision, to chart a course forward for their companies or nations. Friends, God is the ultimate CEO. Using both wisdom and imagination, God has the best and the most wonderful plans for you, for me, for the church, for the world. And God communicates this vision to us through one another, through the words in the Bible, and through the Holy Spirit.

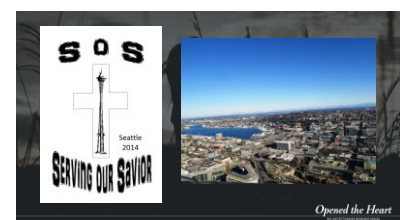


Since almost the beginning of time, God has been casting vision to lead and guide the family of God, opening hearts and minds to love and serve God and one another.



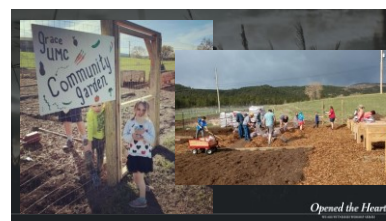
God often spoke in visions. In fact, the word 'vision' appears over 80 times in the Bible. About a dozen appear in the apocryphal writings – most frequently in the book of Daniel in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, one would maybe think that the word 'vision' is used most in the book of Revelation, another apocalyptic writing. In reality, though, the word 'vision' is most used in the book of Acts. In this book that covers the early history of the church, vision appears 11 times. There are frequent references to visions in Acts. Isn't it interesting that at the time when the church was growing the fastest in the Biblical account, the church was most in tune to the voice of God's Spirit? The early church was very tuned in to how God was speaking and guiding through visions and through the voice of the Holy Spirit. What might we learn and become, church, if we were more in tune with the voice of God and the visions that God seeks to bring to us?

At times we do succeed at listening to and following the lead and guide of the Holy Spirit. At times we do see and latch onto God's vision for who or what we could be as individuals or as a church. One recent, great example is the community garden that sits out behind the church. The roots of that project are found in the willingness of one of our own to listen to the voice and nudges of the Holy Spirit and to see the vision that God might have for the church. It began in the summer of 2014 on our conference high school mission trip to Seattle.



Steve Hilton and I needed a bass player for the band, so we recruited his brother Don to come along. Don's work team served in a community garden in Tacoma that provided food to various shelters and missions. Don came home and started the church garden that next summer. Almost all of what is grown is donated to the Cornerstone Rescue Mission, to the Women and Children's Home, to the Abbott House, or to the Piedmont Food Bank.

Don heard the voice of God, he felt the nudge of the Spirit, and he responded faithfully by going where he was led. The vision that God gave came to fruition and has and will continue to be an awesome ministry of Grace. Last summer another vision was cast. God placed a vision on one heart and that person asked, "What if...?" What if we start a community garden next to the current church garden? What if we invite others from the community to come and be a part of Grace? Since one heard and responded to the voice of the Spirit, many other voices have joined the conversation and many hands have contributed to the work that has been done.



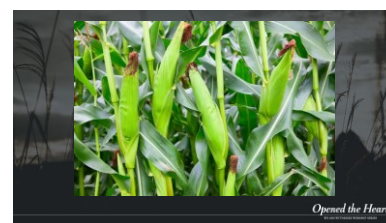
We've experienced God moments along that way, moments that have confirmed the vision and have helped it to come to fruition. A stranger asked for a moment after a Planning and Zoning meeting that I had presented at, offering the church all the 2x8x16s that we wanted to build raised bed garden boxes. He heard and caught the vision that I shared and he wanted to help it come to be. Another donation allowed us to mulch the paths, common area, and under the raised beds. When I went to Mountain West Products to inquire about buying some bulk mulch, she told me she had been thinking about calling the church.

This person had been following the garden's progress on Facebook. They had bagged mulch in the wrong bags and could not sell it. Her heart for her Mom's church was opened to this whisper from God and she put two and two together, offering the church lots of mulch for our new garden. There are other stories of how God has led and guided our little project as others have been open to the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives and in the life of the church.



Our first passage for this morning begins in verse 9. Paul has a vision in which he hears, *"Come over to Macedonia and help us."* In the next verse we see that Paul and his traveling companions *"immediately"* began to head for Macedonia. There is no hesitation, no hemming and hawing. God says 'go' and Paul goes. How often have we heard a word from God and immediately respond? When have we felt the nudge of the Spirit and immediately changed course or plans to do what the Spirit was guiding us to do?

Now, sometimes the whisper or nudge has to percolate a while. For example, back in 2018, when returning from our mission trip to Racine, Wisconsin. We stopped at an amusement park in the Wisconsin Dells. I was standing in a line with Chris Mattke, waiting for a ride, just casually chatting. Out of the blue he starts talking about this corn field back home on the family farm. He shared that they raised an acre of sweet corn for his family and for any friends that wanted some. Then Chris talked about all the need that he saw in Racine and how there was need in Sioux Falls. He told me that every year lots of corn went to waste in the field.



An acre was way more than they ever ate. So, Chris said that he decided that towards the end of the season, he would load up a lot of the corn and would take it to Sioux Falls and would give it to those who served people in need. His experience in Racine opened his heart to a need closer to home. With an opened heart, Chris decided to listen to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and to share some of God's blessings with others.

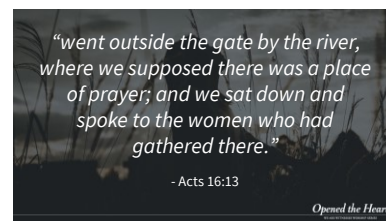


This connects with an interesting thing that we see in our Acts passage. Sometimes when we become aware of others in a new way, we are led to become part of the solution or part of the ministry. Chris saw hunger in a way that he never had before in Racine. Seeing in a new way was also the case in Acts 16. Luke was gathering information about the life and ministry of Jesus for the gospel that he was writing. He interacted with many of the disciples and apostles of the early church. Writing a story drew him into the story. That is what opened Luke's heart and led Luke to go along with Paul. The language in Acts shifts to "we" language: *"we set sail... we remained in the city... we went outside the gate..."* Luke jumps on board and goes. He must have caught the vision that Paul had. He must have felt the passion to go where the Spirit was leading.

That's what happened to Chris. He went along as an adult chaperone because his daughter Cydnee was going and the church needed another chaperone. Going along to help on her mission trip became something that drew him in and affected Chris too. That happens at other times too. It certainly happened after that one person asked, "What if we add a community garden?" It was Paul's trip.

Yet Luke and Paul's other traveling companions went along, eager to see what the Spirit might do if they too responded faithfully to God's call. They went to Macedonia expectantly. They went on full alert, ready for whatever God might bring their way. That's what can happen when we have an open heart, when we have a willingness to partner with God.

In verse 13 we read that on the Sabbath day Paul and company *"went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there."* They were placing themselves in a position to be used by God. The day and the place were intentional choices. They join those who were there, and they begin a conversation with them. One in the group was a woman named Lydia. In the text we see that she was a *"worshiper of God"* and that she was *"a dealer in purple cloth."*



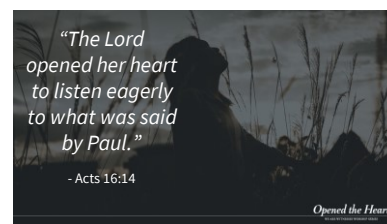
Both of these facts are significant. Lydia is a follower of God, and she is a person of means. Being a follower of God, she would be open to what Paul had to say. The Bible often speaks of the call to care for the poor and the needy, for the orphan and the widow, for the sick and the outcast. God has a heart for such as these. So, it is good and right when we care for these folks. But God, as we learned once again last week, has a heart for all people. Lydia was a person of means and God was concerned about her salvation. Lydia was a lot like you and me and probably a lot like many of the people you and I know and work with or hang out with. God would be pleased if we were invitational to the Lydia's that we know.



Who is in your circle, like you, that needs an invite or a ride to church or to Bible study? May all of our hearts be open to being invitational with those that we know.

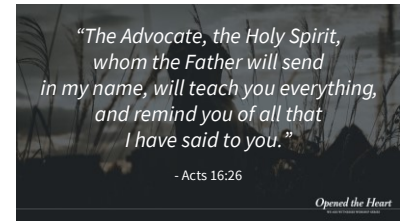
Lydia was also a woman. She is one of the few “normal” or “regular” women in the Bible who is named. As a dealer of purple cloth, as a person of means, she is independent, especially when compared to other women in that culture. Lydia exerts a large amount of control over her own situation. Again, unique for her time and culture. She is not under the control or influence of a man. Again, very unique to her time and culture. She is the head of her own household.

In verse 14 we read, *“The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.”* A worshiper of God’s heart is opened by the Lord. Lydia eagerly receives the words that the Holy Spirit has given Paul to speak. Lydia and her whole household are baptized, and she invites Paul and his companions to come and be guests at her house. She opened her heart to God’s call and then she opened her home to God’s servants, offering hospitality to her new brothers and sisters in Christ. All of this began with a vision that Paul had, and the rest was made possible by willing ears and open hearts – ears and hearts that were open to the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit.



Please turn with me to John 14 as we hear Jesus’ words concerning the Holy Spirit. In verse 23 Jesus says, *“Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”*

Just as the Spirit came at Pentecost and just as the Spirit fell on Cornelius and his household, Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will come upon all who believe, taking up residence in our hearts. Continuing on, Jesus explains the role that the Spirit plays in the lives of believers. In verse 26 we read, *“the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”* The voice of Christ, the Holy Spirit, will teach and remind us of all that Jesus taught and did. The Holy Spirit will lead and guide us – if we are but willing to hear and obedient to follow, just as Paul was and just as Lydia was in our passage from Acts.



The story in Acts began with an open heart, with one who received God’s vision and then immediately responded to God’s call. There were other open hearts too. Luke sensed the passion Paul had and he opened his heart to the work of God, joining Paul on the adventure to Macedonia. Lydia had an open heart too – a heart willing to hear and be moved by Paul’s message, a heart willing to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior, a heart willing to open her home to fellow believers. We too are called to be open to the visions that God plants in our hearts and to live daily with open hearts – hearts willing to seek out and to hear and to follow the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Like Paul and his companions, we too are called to seek to open hearts, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with a world in need of his love and grace, of his hope and healing.

May we pray that God would open hearts to receive the message of faith that we proclaim and may we pray to have open hearts ourselves, hearts open enough to sense and hear, to listen and obey the voice of the Holy Spirit, Christ's indwelling presence in each of us. May this all be so this week. Amen and amen.

**GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. Where might God be leading or calling you? What vision has God planted in your heart?
- 2) *Pray*. How has the Holy Spirit been moving or speaking in your life? Pray for the next steps to take in faith.
- 3) *Study*. Read John 16:4b-15. When or how has the Holy Spirit “guided you into all the truth” (verse 13)?