

## Listening to God

### Acts 16:6-10

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On this Second Sunday in Lent, I'm continuing a series of sermons on the missionary journeys of Paul. The purpose of this series is to find biblical insights into our own journeys of faith. Today's text offers insights on how to listen to God along the way. \*\*\*

I was thinking about calling this sermon, "Confused in Troas," because when Paul and his companions walked into that city they had to be completely baffled about God's leading. For hundreds of miles they have tried to figure out what God wanted, but they only discovered what he didn't want. In spite of all their praying, by the time they got to Troas, they still didn't know where God was leading them.

Maybe you know what that feels like, as well. The job, or the relationship, or the good health you wanted isn't coming. At least it isn't coming anytime soon. By faith, you believe that old line about God shutting a door only to open a window. You would be happy to climb in the window, if you could only find it. But for right now, you are a lot clearer about God's "No", than his "Yes." Some of you are in Troas today with Paul. All of us have been there before. The chances are great that we will be there again. The question that is most on your mind in Troas is, "How do you really listen to God? How do you know for sure what he wants?"

Paul is now on his second missionary journey. The purpose of this trip is to strengthen the churches in Iconium, Derbe, Lystra, and Antioch of Pisidia that he and Barnabas established on their first trip. This time he has as his traveling companions, Silas, possibly Luke, and a young man named Timothy whom Paul met in Lystra. After spending time with each of the churches, the missionaries want to move Southwest from Pisidia into the Roman province of Asia. (This is different than the continent of Asia. It's a part of what we now call Turkey). This province included such cities as Colossae and Ephesus, which Paul doesn't get to until later.

Paul wants to go there now, but we are told that he was forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. We are not told how the Spirit forbade them to speak. Maybe the Spirit spoke to their own spirit. Maybe the road that lead into Asia called, "Via Sebaste" was washed out. It doesn't matter: the Spirit can use the inner still small voice to make God's will known, and the Spirit can wash out the road.

This offers the first helpful insight we get from this passage about discerning God's leading in life. The Spirit guides us along the way. What we would prefer is for God to give us the ultimate destination and make a few helpful pointers about the best route to take. Kind of like an AAA map that highlights all the right roads and circles your final destination in red. I love those maps, and I wonder if AAA can do that, why can't God? Because he chooses to talk to us along the way, as a companion on the journey.

Sometimes all the Spirit of God has to say is, "No, you can't go in that direction." Sometimes a road washes out. Sometimes a prospective employer calls to say you didn't get the job. Sometimes a date goes south in a hurry. It is all a way of hearing a clear "No" from your sacred travel companion. But the "No" doesn't mean stop everything. It only means stop moving in this direction. Go in another.

Thus, to be filled with the Spirit means to keep moving. If you can't go south, go north. If you can't get the job or admitted to the school you want, apply for another. If a treatment doesn't work for your disease, try something else. But you have to stay on the move. Don't wait for more direction than God is going to give you. He's already told you all he has to say at this point on the journey. "You aren't going south to Asia."

So Paul, Silas, and Timothy move north. They wanted to go up to a region called Bithynia, which was up around the Black Sea. But again the Spirit said, "No, you can't do that either." I just love this part of the story. They came from the east. They were prevented by God from moving south or north. So now they are clear. "I get it. It is God's will to move west!" Often that is the only way any of us have clarity about the will of God. All the other possibilities are blocked.

So our missionaries go as far west as they can before hitting water and stop at the seaport town of Troas. Maybe they are confused about where they are going. But they're very, very clear about where they are not going. If you are going to be much use to God along the way in your mission in life, you have to learn how to be thankful for God's "No" along the way. You don't need to understand the "No". You don't even need to agree with it. But you do need, humbly, to say thanks that the Spirit is leading you even by closing doors.

Your mission is not to get to the right place in life. That is God's mission in your life. Your mission is to develop a grateful heart along the way. That is the only way you can be useful to God when he finally gets you where he wants you. So you are not wasting time on all the wrong roads that led in the wrong directions. Those were the roads on which you were learning how to be open to God. Our spiritual character is always best formed on the wrong roads, which means they weren't wrong after all.

When they spent the night in Troas, Paul received a vision of a man from Macedonia, modern Greece, pleading for Paul to come over there to help them. This illustrates a second way that God leads us along the journey. The first way was negatively, by preventing them from moving in the wrong direction. This second way is positive. It is also mystical. Paul had a vision that said, "Come over here."

Throughout the Bible there are references to God speaking to people. Sometimes in a vision. Other times through an angel or a still small voice. I do not believe that this is limited to ancient times. It happens all the time to people today who've paid enough attention to the Holy Spirit to recognize God's voice when he speaks.

D. L. Moody the great revivalist had such an experience, which he presented in classic style. "I cannot describe it, I seldom refer to it. It is almost too sacred an experience to name... I can only say God revealed himself to me, and I had such an experience of his love that I had to ask him to stay his hand... I would not now be placed back where I was before that blessed experience if you should give me all the world; it would be as small as dust in the balance." If you have ever spoken with someone who has had such an experience with God, you will likely find them struggling to describe or explain it. They are even hesitant to speak of it at all, because it was intensely personal, and they are afraid that you will take it away from them.

Notice, though, that the next morning when Paul told his companions about his vision, they had the opportunity to legitimate it as a calling for them as well. "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." (16:10) Even the Apostle Paul had to make his personal vision accountable to others.

From the beginning, the church has always responded to the vision of an individual by making it accountable to the community, and to what has been revealed of God's will in the Scriptures. This is one of the reasons why the Early Church developed a canon of Scriptures--to provide a means of keeping the mystical accountable to orthodoxy. But it was never the intent of orthodoxy to rule out the mystical. Only to give it accountability.

Often someone will come into my office to talk about a mystical experience they have had. I tell them that these visions and inner voices are wonderful things. I believe they are real. But they are only signs. And the point of a sign is to point to something beyond itself. When you see a sign that says, "New York 100 miles", that means you aren't there yet. Imagine stopping and taking your picture next to the sign. No, keep going, the sign claims. You aren't there yet. What all signs and visions point to is the giver of them--God himself.

This leads then to the third and most important way God leads us--by drawing us into union with Jesus Christ. In Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, he claimed that those who are spiritual discern all things for they have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:14-16)

This is ultimately the Spirit's ministry in our lives. Even more than getting us to the right place geographically, the Spirit wants to get us into the right place spiritually, which is to be drawn so close to Christ that you know his mind. So the direction and the leading thing takes care of itself as we are drawn deeper and deeper into the thinking of Jesus himself. But to know how Jesus thinks, you have to spend a lot of time with him. That is why we keep encouraging you to practice the devotional and prayer life. It is why we give Bibles to our children, and why we come to worship. It is all a way of spending time with Jesus so we can know and even enter into his mind.

When I was a little boy, it didn't take me long to realize that if my mother raised her eyebrow at me, it meant that I was in a heap of trouble. As soon as the company left I was going to get a harsh lecture. If I was lucky. But when I went to visit my grandparents, and saw my grandfather raise his eyebrow at my grandmother at the end of the evening, it didn't mean she was in trouble at all. It meant he was hoping to get some loving that night. If he was lucky. But I had to spend time with all of these family members to read their signs. My wife Annie, who has heard more of my sermons than anyone should have to, has discovered that when I scratch my head while preaching it's because I'm lost in the sermon. When someone else does that it's because their head is itching. The more you know someone, the more you love them, the easier it is to read them. It is only as we spend time with Jesus, and fall more deeply in love with him, that we learn how to read him. And only then will we know what to do.

What employer wants an employee who has to always be told what to do? The hope is that eventually, he or she will learn the job and simply know what to do. That is how we know we have matured in the faith--we have enough of the mind of Christ within us simply to know what is the right thing to do. How do we get there? By paying attention to the blocked roads and listening for the still small voice that invites you to a new place, and most of all, by drawing so close to your Savior Jesus that you know his mind.

As I read our text today, it is only the Holy Spirit who can provide any of this for you. So maybe the first step is to begin each day in prayer, opening a place in your life that the Holy Spirit can fill.

O God, we are humbled that you would choose to use us in the great mission of bringing this world closer to heaven. By your Holy Spirit, prevent us from chasing the wrong dreams, give us glorious visions of your own dreams, and along the way draw us into the holy fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit. Amen.