

Easter People: Prayerfully Determined
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Acts 16:9-15

Today we continue our series of sermons based on passages from the book of the Acts of the Apostles focused on what it means to live as Easter people. By Easter people, I mean people whose lives reflect the power and priorities of the risen Christ. Our text for today shows us how the budding Christian church found its way into Europe for the first time. As you listen, note how it all begins, and how Paul responds to the vision, and how Lydia responds the message that Paul brings.

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.' 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.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, 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. 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. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper 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. 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.

It all started with a vision.

26 years ago, a young chef named Jose Andres had just opened Jaleo, his Spanish tapas restaurant on 7th Street NW. From that vantage point, he would often look out at the building across the street. It was the place, he knew, where a nurse named Clara Barton had started her impossible endeavor of taking care of the troops during the Civil War, which gave birth to the Red Cross. Something about her story stuck with him. Andres said recently, *"When I was 23, that inspired me a lot. It doesn't require a lot to make a difference. Sometimes it's just willingness and the effort you put into it."*ⁱ

With that in mind, in 2010, when a 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti, Andres started a non-profit called World Central Kitchen, designed to tackle poverty and hunger through food, specifically through vocational and culinary training. Over the years since, the mission of that organization has grown to providing immediate food relief and Andres has served millions of hot meals to people ravaged by natural disasters in places like Haiti, Houston, California, and most notably Puerto Rico.

Interviewed about this time last year, the chef said, *"I dreamed that World Central Kitchen would grow, not just in America, but worldwide, to be like food first responders. I will say that will happen eventually. It's already happening. You see it doesn't require a lot but the willingness to do it."*ⁱⁱ

It all started with a vision. The Apostle Paul would surely have said the same thing about winding up in Philippi, where he met and baptized a wealthy woman named Lydia. In the verses preceding today's text, the book of Acts says that the Holy Spirit had forbidden them to speak the word in Asia

and that the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go into Bithynia. That's when, one night, Paul had a waking dream, where he saw a man from Macedonia begging him to come over to Macedonia and help us. After he saw it, and this is what grabbed me, he and his companions *immediately* tried to cross over, being *convinced* that God had called them to come and proclaim the good news to the people there.

What strikes me about the text is not so much that Paul had the vision from God, but that he followed through on the vision of a man crying for help. Because despite what Jose Andres says, it requires more than just willingness to respond to and help realize a vision. Oh, willingness is important, no doubt. It is essential. But it also takes openness and prayer and **determination**.

It takes prayer (or better yet, its close cousin meditation) to help nurture the sort of spiritual openness needed to glimpse a vision to begin with—and to discern whether it is from God. My guess is that Paul and his companions were spending a lot of time in prayer as they sought to figure out where God was guiding them. The vision didn't just pop up in the night. Prayer had readied and opened them to receive it.

It is worth talking here about the different ways we talk about having a vision in our wider secular culture. Much of the time, such conversations are cast in the light of where **we** see ourselves going and what **we** see ourselves being and doing in the future. There is value in that, it charts a course, but there's not a lot of transcendence in it.

I'd venture a guess that if we asked members of the graduating class of Langley or McLean or Woodlawn or Madison or Yorktown or TJ or any of other schools private or public around here, what is your vision for your future life? more than half of them—not our kids, not Immanuel kids of course—would give an answer like, "I don't know. Go to college, graduate, find a job where I can make money so that I can have the sort of life that I want." They may have a career picked out, perhaps even one in a helping profession, but a true sense of a higher vision beyond themselves, one that truly and deeply blesses others, not so much. Now to be fair, eighteen is a little early in life to have that kind of vision—but it would be sad indeed to ask those same young people that question when they are fifty and not get a deeper answer.

I suspect that most of us, even in church, are probably more comfortable with that notion of having a personal or corporate vision—or vision statement—than with saying God spoke to me or to us in a vision. It feels much safer to say "this is what I or we envision for my life or my organization" than it is to say, unequivocally, **God told me** to do this. It was not for nothing that Susan B. Anthony, who fought so hard for women's suffrage and the abolition of slavery, said, "I distrust people who know so well what God wants them to do because I notice that it always coincides with their own desires." We're rightfully, even in church—perhaps especially in church—careful about such claims.

One way to sort out whether a vision comes from God or is, as Ebenezer Scrooge would have called it, *an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese or an underdone potato*, is to ask several questions about it.

Is it calling you outside of yourself? If the vision I receive calls me to something bigger than just me and my own desires, my own fears, then it is more likely to be from God.

Is it calling you to the work of compassion? If the vision I receive calls me to respond to human need—like Paul seeing that man in Macedonia and discerning that they needed good news brought

to them or Jose Andres looking across the street at the place Clara Barton started her work and then feeling led to use his gifts and passion for food to make hot meals to meet the needs of a hungry world. Or consider how the FACETS Hypothermia Shelter program got started after two people without homes froze to death one winter night 15 or 20 years ago and someone vowed that would not happen again if she had anything to do with it.

If the vision I receive calls me to respond to human need, it is more than likely from God.

Is the vision tapping into who you uniquely are—your own unique gifts and talents and passions, your personal and organizational DNA? I loved getting a chance to see the video of Jonathon Reckford's commencement speech this year at the University of North Carolina. Reckford is the Executive Director of Habitat for Humanity International and is married to Nina Toups' niece. In his talk, he encouraged the young people to pay attention to what voices they were allowing to speak into their lives, how they would define what it means to be rich, and, to think about what they were uniquely gifted to do. Though he didn't put it this way, I think he was asking them to be open to God's vision for them.

Finally, is the vision calling you to the path of least resistance, to the easy, unencumbered, road? Because if the answer to that is yes, then it probably ISN'T from God.

That's why I think it's important to note that Easter People are called to be determined. After they, after we, prayerfully determine what to be determined about, Easter people push ahead, knowing that there will be resistance to their message. When Paul and Silas and Timothy and Luke and whoever else were with them set out from Troas to go to Macedonia because some man appeared to Paul in a waking dream asking for help, they had to know that they would not be greeted everywhere they went like conquering heroes. They had to know, being followers of Jesus, that the message of the Gospel and its call to serve the least of these and set at liberty those who were oppressed—would provoke some opposition. And sure enough it did—it landed them in a Philippian prison. But that didn't stop them.

After they arrived in Philippi, they went out to the river, where they supposed there was a place of prayer. And they found there some women, including a woman named Lydia, a wealthy seller of purple cloth, who listened to them—and because she was in a place of prayer, God opened her heart to listen eagerly. Then after listening to them and their message, Lydia, a leading figure in that area, decided that she wanted to be baptized—she and her household. So she was.

I love what the text says happened next. It says, "She urged them. If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay in my home." Then the last five words: And she prevailed upon us.

Have you ever been prevailed upon? That used to happen to me when I lived in North Carolina. I'd go and visit somebody and I'd think to myself, "I've got to watch my weight. They're feeding me really well around here." They would prevail upon me.

Pastor Aaron won't you stay and have dinner with us? I'd think, "Judith is probably making dinner at home, but maybe just a little bite would be okay here." Pastor Aaron won't you have some poundcake? They prevailed upon me so much in my seven years there that I gained and lost about 150 pounds. They prevailed upon me.

Do you know what that means? They wouldn't take no for an answer.

Easter people are determined. Lydia knew that. She sensed it right off. As a friend of mine said, “I don’t think she was used to getting no for an answer.” Maybe she wasn’t. She was determined about the right things.

She was determined to have them stay. She was determined to learn more. Lydia was determined to welcome the budding church into her home. She was determined to use her wealth for the good of the church and to use her position to help others in the community learn what the good news was all about.

Perhaps Jose Andres was right. “It doesn’t require a lot to make a difference. Sometimes it’s just willingness and the effort you put into it.”

God, you just keep prevailing upon me. Thank you.

ⁱ <https://wtop.com/food-restaurant/2018/06/small-plates-big-mission-jose-andres-from-chef-to-humanitarian/>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.