

Faith Moving Forward

Acts 16: 6-15

John 5: 1-9

Before the days of automated road painting trucks, the county hired a new person to paint fresh yellow lines down the middle of all the county roads. The first day this man painted an astonishing 10 miles of road with new yellow lines down the middle. This was a record! No one had ever painted ten miles of yellow lines in one day. The boss was very impressed.

Although still pretty good the second day the man only painted 6 miles of yellow lines. The third day the man managed to only paint 3 miles of yellow lines which is not very good. The boss thought the man just had a bad day. On the fourth day, the man only managed to paint one single mile of yellow line. The boss had no choice but to call him into the office for an explanation.

The man began to tell him that the painting of the lines was getting more difficult every day. The boss asked how it could be getting more difficult; these were lines on a road, the same thing every day. The man explained further: his progress was declining because every day he was getting further and further away from his paint bucket.

Failing to adapt to new or changing situations can prove to be real handicaps in making progress as life, its opportunities, and its choices unfold in various ways. For people of faith, we need to be responsive to the new situations in our own lives, the changing circumstances facing others, and an awareness that the way things were even a few years ago have changed drastically today. If we persist in the direction we're headed – moving forward but reliant on the old familiar with eyes firmly gazing in the rearview mirror –we're unlikely to arrive at the desired destination. In fact, we should expect to collide with a new reality to which we had never given regard before. If we're insistent that reality conform to our perceptions and assumptions, rather than conforming our perceptions and assumptions to reality, we're going to find our paint bucket further and further away from us. Little will get accomplished, if anything. We're going to find it is a lot harder to make sense, to make progress, even to be happy standing still.

In our faith life, God wants us to receive every blessing. Of course, we need to realize that God will bring us toward blessings, generating opportunities we could not imagine, but we need to make faithful decisions to get to those blessings. As we come to the threshold of blessing, will we seek the counsel of the Holy Spirit and search for prayerful guidance, or do what we've always done before?

In the reading from Acts, Paul and his crew are on a mission to share the good news of the Kingdom and plant mission outposts in the Roman province of Asia which is western Turkey today, the part of Turkey that's closest to the Aegean Sea across from Greece. At least that was Paul's plan, to work through the cities of Philadelphia, Smyrna, Sardis, Ephesus, Thyatira and Pergamum. Being thwarted (for whatever reason; we don't know why) from Asia and having traveled northward, Paul plans to turn to the east toward Bithynia and Pontus which borders the Black Sea. But he is thwarted again in his

plans and cannot head east. While he is in the northwest corner of Asia Minor or Turkey, he is standing at the crossroads in his journey, and he is sitting at the crossroads of two continents. If he can't go south and enter Asia, and he can't go east and enter Bithynia and Pontus, he can either go backwards the way he came or face the sea.

Let's be clear. You don't head off on a mission trip like this without some plan. Unfortunately for Paul, his plan has fallen off the map. It has to be tempting to say, "Look, crew, we're running into one obstacle after another. We're getting nowhere. Let's fall back, re-group, and try again."

But in the midst of this quandary, Paul has a vision of taking his mission across the water into Macedonia, into Europe. This wasn't *supposed* to be the destination. The road Paul planned to travel was the more familiar one around Asia Minor, familiar turf for him having come originally from the province of Cilicia in the southeast.

But the expected path plotted by his GPS was not leading anywhere and any plan of his – Plans A, B, and C – had all fallen apart. Still, he had engaged a long and difficult journey, and had come to the threshold of blessing. It required his faithfulness in the blessing, providence, and direction of God. Paul ends up choosing a direction that he never expected to take. In a witness to his faithfulness, he trusted that the blessing lay in that unfamiliar, unexpected direction, across the water, across to the European continent where he had **not** intended to go.

Paul follows this calling of his vision and eventually arrives in Philippi. Informed of a synagogue meeting by the river, his group encounters a cluster of women on the banks. (Note once again the importance of women to the enterprise of sharing the good news of the Kingdom way and life.) One woman, Lydia, is identified as a worshiper of God, not a Jew necessarily and quite likely a Gentile, but still a worshiper of the one God of the Jews. What do we call these Gentile worshipers of the God of the Jews? **God-fearers.**

Paul uses this opportunity to share the good news of Jesus and the Kingdom with her. She finds the good news compelling and accepts faith in the Lord. Together with her household, she is baptized. As a merchant in purple cloth – garments of the wealthy and powerful – and having a household of her own, and being able to offer hospitality to Paul's group, we learn something about Lydia. She is a woman of means and connections – a great foundation for establishing a ministry – a gracious blessing indeed.

Paul's faithfulness to God in choosing the unknown path instead of his planned direction resulted in great reward and surprising success. But didn't Paul have doubts? Wouldn't we have doubts about stepping across that threshold, leaving Asia Minor and entering Macedonia in Europe, leaving behind his well-established plans?

If you didn't have doubts, I'd think there was something wrong with you. But here, doubts are **not** the defining energy and don't decide the direction. The strong faith and spirit of the believer who has experienced the power of God and the transforming

power of new life in the risen Jesus has this reservoir of trust and empowerment to overcome doubts and move boldly in faithfulness. The best Christian disciples *today* will still follow the adventurous pathways that the Spirit opens for faithful servants, like Paul. God always has more for us when we choose faithfulness and discover his promise for us in new ways, new directions, and with newly defined lives.

This confronts our common patterns, challenges our easy routines, and counters our well-defined lifestyles. We keep doing what we always do because it has the **appearance** of necessity. Actually, we *choose* to do many of the things we do, and we don't realize how unhelpful this may be in the long run. Are we simply fooling ourselves?

Consider the man by the pool at Bethesda in the reading from John's gospel. It seems the pool at Bethesda was believed to have healing powers when the waters stirred, likely from an underground spring. This doesn't sound very Jewish, and it probably has nothing to do with anything Jewish. One might think that since this healing pool is in Jerusalem that it must be connected to the Temple and the like. Not so.

Jerusalem had been under Roman occupation for over 80 years, and there were many elements of Hellenistic society, including its deities, that opened shop in Jerusalem. These kinds of things were strenuously avoided by Torah-abiding Jews who bristled at their presence in the Holy City of their God. There was no record of any healing pool in Bethesda. They knew about the ancient Pool of Siloam, but nothing about healing and nothing in the area of Bethesda. Then archaeologists discovered what would be the right location for this pool. It was near the Temple of Asclepius. Asclepius is a Hellenistic healing god whose temples often featured *asclepions* or healing pools. Now pieces start fitting together in an interesting way.

In this story unique to the gospel of John – there's nothing like it in the other gospels – we find Jesus, the Jew, has ventured by this healing pool connected to the Temple of Asclepius. In itself, that's rather bold, going into an off-limits area claimed for a Hellenistic god.

People with all kinds of ailments are gathered there. One man, lame for 38 years, was lying on his mat when Jesus came and asked him how long he'd had his condition. Learning the long time involved, Jesus asks, "Do you want to get well?" The question implies that the man seems content with his condition and with the promise offered by the pagan healing pool. Indeed, the man whimpers that others with less disabling conditions get into the waters ahead of him every time, and he has no one to help him move more quickly. This guy is pathetic. He seems to want Jesus to help him move more quickly into the pool to gain his healing.

Jesus has compassion on him. His life's efforts have been reduced to waiting for the pool to stir to life and then, quick as he can, drag himself to the edge, and then down the steps before the water stops. It's like a cruel game he's forced to play over and over. You can almost see the worn path he has created from his spot in the shade to the edge

of the pool, a path he has dragged himself across a hundred times to no avail. But it *is* familiar, and it has such promise, right? Or does it?

Jesus comes to reveal the hope of God, challenging the invalid's assumptions. "Do you *want* to get well?" Jesus wants to show him a new way.

Jesus may have thought, 'But you're so pathetic, why bother trying to explain it to you. I'll just give it to you. That's the only way you'll get it.' The man does nothing to warrant this blessing. He doesn't even ask for the blessing. And Jesus has no verbal point to make, no speech, no summons to faithfulness, nothing! He lets the healing speak for itself. However, Jesus does heal the man immediately when the god Asclepius cannot and has not for 38 years. Jesus brings game.

Jesus challenges us in the same way, "Do you want God's blessing for you to be fulfilled?" If you think your current plan is doing it, think again, pal. If you think that it's going to occur in church on a Sunday morning because the preacher said something profound, let me assure you that this was never intended to be where that faithful witness occurs or where the blessing gets experienced.

The church and its Sunday service are supposed to be an outpost for the faithful, a sanctuary where God's people can be reconnected to God's purpose, a refuge from the rigors of faithful service in the world. From the sanctuary, the faithful go out to make disciples, new servants of the Kingdom, giving witness to the Kingdom of new life. It doesn't happen here.

We need to find the edge where God is calling us, where the Spirit is leading us. The Lord is always calling us into **his** world and away from our own, to be bold, daring, and ground-breaking, to seek the blessing we cannot see or even imagine. Whatever our path or our call, may we always seek his way, knowing the Lord is always out there, ahead of us, waiting for his disciples to move forward, and inviting us to the adventure and the blessing of faithful service.