

***Spirit-Led Route***  
**Psalm 67; Acts 16:9-15**

Visions from God are surprising things, for they utterly transform us and alter our course. In the early 1990's, George Gallup Sr. asked Presbyterians whether they had ever experienced a vision from God. Surprisingly, half of the church members he asked said they had had a vision from God, and even a higher percentage of clergy said the same thing. Perhaps one reason this statistic is surprising is because we simply do not talk about our visions from God – and maybe for good reason. If we were to talk openly about God's involvement in our lives, we could not control the plan, as we do in strategic planning. On the other hand, we might find ourselves with open hearts that readily receive the gospel that forever changes us, even to the point of providing hospitality to foreigners and those just freed from prison.

When we talk of God's vision today in church, we typically mean strategic planning, as one step in a congregation's planning process. Perhaps talking about God's vision in this way is more comfortable for us because it seems more manageable to us. We can discover what vision is by following logical steps: 1) pray; 2) thank God for working in our congregation; 3) discern God's vision for us by calling a consultant, and so on.

In a way Paul's vision in this passage does move him and his companions to Macedonia, "being convinced that God had called us to proclaim that good news to them." However, there is a vast difference between our own well-conceived scripting of God's vision, and receiving a vision from God. In this passage from The Acts of the Apostles we have a great example: Paul thought he was being directed to Asia and was preparing to move in that direction, when he had a vision of a Macedonia man pleading for help. God sets Paul's course by vetoing Paul's strategic plan. With that vision, Paul and his companions change their plans. In Acts 16:9-15, the apostolic "crossing over" to Macedonia and the conversion of Lydia are examples of inspired decisions that lead to creative ministry. This Spirit-led route brings Paul to Europe for the first time to continue to witness to the gospel message.

Paul thought he was going to minister to a man pleading for help. That was his vision. However, upon arriving in Macedonia, instead of meeting a man, Paul sits down and talks to the women gathered there. Yet again, God's mission takes a different course. The first convert in Philippi is not "a man of Macedonia" but "a woman named Lydia...a dealer in purple cloth." In this chance encounter by the river, the Holy Spirit, Paul and Lydia work together. Paul would not have been led to this place at this particular time were it not for his openness to be guided, that Paul was at God's disposal, sensitive to being steered in one direction and away for others.

Lydia would not have arrived at this particular place and time had she not been a worshipper of God, a seeker already on her way, and open to the movement and direction of the Spirit (though she was not aware of the Spirit). Paul does his part. Lydia does her part. But it is God who guides all things and works in and through all things, not just for good, but to accomplish what would otherwise be impossible. It is the Spirit who brings Lydia to Paul so that she can hear the gospel.

Longing a grace meet on the bank of the river. The longing heart of a faithful woman is opened by the gracious impulse of a faith-giving God in an action that is at once both fully human and fully divine.

Long before any organized church structure took shape, believers gathered and God's spirit moved them, often taking them from the established areas of comfort. The story of the early church takes these first missionaries outside their circle of the known and the comfortable.

In the Biblical witness, visions from God are the norm, not the exception. From Adam and Eve through Revelation, God is engaged with human affairs to catch our attention and transform us. But transformation can be, usually is painful, especially when we know the route we want to take. However, when God visits us, we are undeniably changed, much like Paul on the Road to Damascus.

As we digest this passage and all that is demonstrated for us, as we discern God's will for our lives, both individually and collectively in the community of Faith called First Presbyterian Church of Thomasville, we are reminded that authentic mission is always a response to the need within the community, not simply the missionary's need to proclaim.

What are the needs of this community? In what direction is God guiding us?