

Shift Happens
Acts 16: 6-15
Don Lincoln

I don't know anyone who has had the chance to live life entirely based on their first choices. Sooner or later, in matters large or small, everyone has to live on the basis of a second or third, or even 23rd choice. Think of the high school student who is not accepted to the university of her dreams, the one she longs to attend because her parents, cousins, aunts and uncles all went to that university and graduated from it. But she doesn't get in.

Or the phone call from the employer you know has the perfect job for you, who says, "Sorry – you didn't get the job." Sometimes what you thought was going to be a really promising date – the potential love of your life – just goes south. In a hurry. Think of how many marriages – happily ever after – turn out not to be so happy.

Sometimes, you know exactly where you're going – it's so clear, so obvious – you know where you're headed, and then "BAM", an unanticipated, unexplained, unaccounted for change takes place, and.....shift happens. (I hope you read the title of the sermon in the bulletin – Shift Happens!).

And it's not just minor turns in the road. Sometimes the shift is like an along-the-fault-line, tectonic-plates-kind-of-shift that happens in life and we're not sure we can recover from it.

The great artist, James Whistler did not set out to be an artist. He wanted to be a soldier. But he flunked out of West Point because he couldn't pass chemistry. "If silicon had been a gas," Whistler used to say, "I would have been a major general." Whistler failed at soldiering, took a stab at engineering and flunked that as well, and as a last resort, took up painting, with remarkable results like his portrait Whistler's mother.

In our text from Acts, the Apostle Paul is on his **second** missionary journey, along with Silas, Timothy, and probably Luke. The purpose of this trip was to strengthen the churches in Derbe, Lystra and Antioch of Pisidia. These are all churches established on the FIRST missionary journey. They want to go back and spend time with them, further nurturing these churches and their witness to the gospel, and then after that they want to head southwest into the Roman province of Asia – the area we know now as Turkey – the cities of Colossae and Ephesus are there.

Believing they were called to evangelize this region, they headed south down the road. But we are told the Holy Spirit closed the road. We're not told how. Maybe Paul just sensed it in his heart. Maybe the road was washed out. Sometimes the spirit uses a still small voice, and other times the Spirit washes out the road. Shift happens.

The text continues and says when Paul and friends “had come opposite Mysia they tried to enter Bithynia; but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go there either.” They tried south. Now the Spirit prevented them from going north. They had come from the East – so Paul looks at his friends and says “**NOW I am certain of the will of God. It’s WEST!**” It’s nice to know even Paul the Apostle wasn’t always certain himself. But when shift happened, Paul looked for a new plan and was open to a new opportunity. The text tells us, “so passing by Mysia they went down to Troas.”

Thanks be to God Paul was willing to go with the shift. For while in Troas, Paul receives a vision to cross the sea to go to Macedonia. Do you know where that is? Southeastern Europe. This is huge. For this was the first time the gospel enters the continent of Europe. And from Europe it eventually came to America, and then Philadelphia, and then to Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All because discerning missionaries kept moving, kept trusting their primary navigator – God’s spirit – when they hit closed roads; when shift happened.

Because after all, God promises to get you where God wants you to be. God can use all the wrong roads to get you to the right place. Because God owns all the roads.¹

Do you get it? You wanted Bithynia and you got Troas. Shift happens. We all know that experience. So take the second best, the remnants of a disappointed expectation – and make it a first class opportunity. Because of Paul’s willingness to follow God’s lead in the movement of the Spirit – that’s exactly what happens. Paul thought he knew where he was supposed to go – but ultimately it was Paul’s conviction to follow where God would take him, and he figured there must be something good in Troas if God wants him to go there. Shift happens. Run with it.

So – what happens in Macedonia?

They travel to Philippi, and there, at a prayer meeting by the river, they meet Lydia. Lydia is a seller of purple cloth, a color associated with royal garb. That’s because the dye is made from a tiny mollusk that grows only in that region of the Mediterranean; it’s called the murex, and it’s incredibly difficult to procure the couple drops of liquid from the little snail and very time consuming and expensive to distill it into this expensive dye.

We don’t know how Lydia got her start, but she’s impressive. Her clients are the rich and famous of Philippi. She is a prominent businesswoman, in command of her own life and her own household. She is also a God-fearer – a Gentile attracted to Judaism – spiritually hungry.

At the river, Paul shares the gospel with a group of women, and Lydia, and something decisive takes place. Shift happens. A moment of insight, an illumination Luke describes this way: “The Lord opened Lydia’s heart.”² Lydia hears the Gospel of Jesus Christ and is baptized. The first – the first – European Christian. Lydia. A woman.

Immediately, the text says, Lydia prevailed upon Paul and friends: “Come, stay in my house.” “Mi casa, Su casa.” “I will take care of you, whatever you need, every day, I will take care of your daily needs, my expense.” Paul and his companions take her up on the offer – after all, the text DOES say, “she prevailed on us” – and her home becomes an outpost for their missionary work in Europe. Shift happens.

It’s huge. Later in Acts, Paul and Silas are in prison. Earthquake comes and doors are shaken open; they don’t leave because they don’t want the jailer to get all freaked out. When they are finally set free, where do they go? Lydia’s house. Lydia, the patron of the Gospel. In all likelihood, HER home became the “house church” in the city of Philippi. **As in “Philippians.”** Do you and I get it? Shift happens. You end up in Troas. Meet Lydia by the river. She gets the Gospel. Opens her home. Ministry in Europe takes root. Shift happens as Paul and Lydia ran with it.

Later, Paul in his letter to the Philippians writes, “I’ve been all over the world – and there’s no church like the Philippians. Nobody rolls out the red carpet for me like the Philippians. When I wasn’t with you, you prayed for me. When I was in Thessalonica, you were sending money to help me out. What a blessing you are to me!” That’s what Paul says about the Philippians. Why? It all started with Lydia’s hospitality and generosity.

Sometimes shift happens TO you. And sometimes God is counting **ON** you to take the opportunity to make shift happen. Either way, God alone knows where the road might lead, but it’s often all in one’s attitude about the shift.

How easy it would’ve been for Paul to say, “OK God – I’ll go to Troas, but I’ll do as little as I have to do to get by.” Paul could’ve sulked, and fumed and felt sorry for himself.³ Instead, when shift happened, Paul went, and invested himself – dug in and started meeting people. He began to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Lydia could’ve stayed on the sidelines. Not done anything else. Not jeopardized her position in that community – being associated with this radical new religion. She could have just focused on her business and kept her religion as a personal, private matter – kept it to herself. But she didn’t. And when shift came her way, Lydia was ready to move.

Sometimes shift happens because people respond to what’s right in front of them. The unanticipated, unexplained, unaccounted for opportunity that shows up on their doorstep – they take hold of it, they respond to it, they run with it, and shift happens.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. For most of us, it marks the beginning of summer. But tomorrow some of us will remember those who were willing to lay down their life for the sake of the common good. An American flag flown over a cemetery in Belgium, and a picture of my wife, Linda’s, uncle Mike’s grave there in that cemetery – from 1944 – that sits out on our table prominently this weekend. We remember.

But too many of us have forgotten when Memorial Day began. We forget it was started after America's bloodiest war – a civil war amongst ourselves. A day to remember the fallen, but also to remember why they fell. To remember our tainted history – and the shift that was required in this nation – a shift that still has not come to completion. To sing with Ron, "America, America, God mend thine every flaw....."

I remember one of my favorite lines from Jay Leno: "I would do anything to have a better body, except diet and exercise."

Sometimes shift happens. And you and I have to adjust. Sometimes shift is waiting to happen – waiting for you and me to make a move.

I want for the world to know Jesus. I want war to stop. I want addiction to lose its grip. I want the guns to no longer rattle in school hallways and houses of worship, or in the streets of Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago, and St. Louis. I want there to be racial harmony, pay equity, I want for women to no longer be abused or harassed. I want shift to happen.

What are you and I willing to do, to respond to the shift that needs to happen in and around us – and to be, like Lydia and Paul, agents of change?

We ask our young men and young women – somebody's sons and daughters – to sign up; to be willing to go to war; to fight for the right – to lay down their lives for the common good.

What are you and I willing to do? What are we willing to give up? Our pride? Our position? Our resources? Our prejudices? Am I willing to make acquaintance with someone who doesn't have the same religion as me, or the same politics as me, or the same skin color as me, or the same gender identity as me?

If we're willing to ask young people to lay down their lives, what are the rest of us willing to lay down, so that God's people might "...study war no more..." - whether it's that national kind of war or that interpersonal war. What might you and I be willing to do so shift might happen?

".....I would do anything to have a better body, except diet and exercise."

In that letter to the Philippians, Paul also wrote about this Jesus Christ "...who did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped..." – a thing to be held on to, to be gripped firmly with all His might – but rather Jesus "emptied Himself and became a servant." You talk about shift happening! There's a life giving shift in the servant – the One who gave Himself for the salvation of the world for you and for me. That's the kind of shift you and I are to give witness to in our lives.

Jean Vanier was founder of the international L'Arche Community movement. Well known author and theologian Henri Nouwen was in one of the L'Arche communities in Canada. Well, Jean Vanier, died just 3 weeks ago. Listen to his words: "In the midst of

all the complexities of the world, it really is this simple. The response to war is to live like brothers and sisters. The response to injustice is to share. The response to despair is a limitless trust and hope. The response to prejudice and hatred is forgiveness and love. To work for community is to work for humanity. To work for peace is to work for a true political solution; it is to work for the Kingdom of God. It is to work to enable every one to live and taste the secret joys of the human person united to the eternal.”⁴ To make shift happen.

May it be so. Amen.

1. M. Craig Barnes, “*Road Closed*”, Shadyside Presbyterian Church, January 9, 2005.
2. David H.C. Read, “*Lydia: The Gospel for the Good*”, Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, April 8, 1984.
3. Jeffrey Wampler, “*Second Best*”, Presbyterian Church of Westfield, October 19, 1986.
4. Jean Vanier, “*Community and Growth*,” Inward/Outward Daily Quote, Church of the Saviour, May 24, 2019.