

Destination: Philippi
Acts 16:9-15
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First & Central Presbyterian Church
Wilmington, Delaware
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It was the greatest of travel inventions since the creation of asphalt. In 1932, the Automobile Association of America, “Triple A”, which had been producing road maps for nearly 30 years, rolled out its first “TripTik”.

For the next 60 years, wise and experienced travelers, weeks before loading up the family station wagon with kids and sleeping bags, would dust off their AAA card, and head for the local office to order a TripTik. It’s more than a map, it’s more than directions, it’s more than simply getting one from point A to point B – it’s a complete travel management kit! Pages and routes selected, assembled in a little spiral bound book that flipped from segment to segment with interesting facts and suggestions printed on the inside fold of the pages. All a driver or navigator had to do was follow the highlighted route carefully lined in yellow marker. Foolproof and comforting to know that you were in good hands – I know – wrong company!

But wait! There’s more! In the little white plastic bag in which your TripTik was delivered and which can ultimately be used as a receptacle for trash and littler, one would find a stack of TourBooks for every state on your route, chock full of trusted hotel/motel restaurant descriptions and ratings, along with listings of sights to see and tour.

But wait! There’s more! Just to be sure the wise traveler was fully prepared, your AAA agent packed a stack of fold-out road maps, again for every state and region, and probably one of the entire United States, just for good measure.

How many of you, right now, have a AAA map, tour book, or old TripTik in your car?

Today, however, many of us rely on GPS technology to get us where we’re going. We either have it built in to our cars like On-Star, or as an aftermarket accessory on our dashboards, like a Garmin, or, as it’s been recently reported, more and more of us are relying on the mapping software in our phones.

The times they are a changin’ and it appears as though the era of TripTiks, and road maps for that matter, is coming to a close. Now we have real-time navigation and traffic updates, the ability to “re-calculate” at the slightest wrong turn, and even the data needed to avoid construction and other delays. Seems to take the fun out of driving if you can’t argue and blame the person with their nose in a map trying to give directions. My Garmin, named “Evvy,” doesn’t ever get rattled or talk back, she simply and politely, and in her most charming Australian English accent, tells me where to go.

Apparently, the Apostle Paul was not so lucky. His first navigator and traveling companion, Barnabas, had a mind of his own and after a particularly harsh dispute over

who else should be included in their evangelistic treks, told Paul where to go and they parted company. Paul was on his own for a bit until he met Timothy, the son of a Jewish mother and Greek father. He was spoken of highly and, like Paul, traveled easily in both the Jewish and Greek worlds. Their travels at that time kept them in and around Asia Minor where, according to the author of Acts, their reception was quite hardy and generous.

It was around that time that Paul heard a voice, and not from his Garmin, but in a vision he assumed was from God. The voice told him to leave Asia, cross the Aegean Sea, and visit the region of Macedonia on the continent of Europe. In ways literal and figurative, Paul was on foreign ground.

He had no TourBook or even poorly folded map to help him get his bearings. He sailed to the shores of Neapolis and then headed overland to Philippi. Paul, accompanied by Timothy, explored the city sizing up its potential as the site of a new church development.

I wonder where we might go to get a sense of a city or town. Would we head for the major shopping district? The town square? A good size neighborhood? Maybe look for a few tall steeples? I know of a couple who are in sales and when they arrive to a new town, the woman gets her hair done at a busy salon. She can get the gist of a place in a few chatty hours.

Paul's modus operandi, we know from other stories, was that he'd eventually wander over to the synagogue and engage the teachers and rabbis in some theological banter. In Philippi, on the Sabbath, he headed outside the gates near a river and found people gathered for worship and prayer. There, he met Lydia – an anomaly of first century culture.

She was a woman, on her own, running a business, apparently doing pretty well, and in charge of her own household. It was the right place at the right time for both Paul and Lydia. Paul spoke, she listened. She questioned, he answered. Dialogue, exchange, relationship, and trust being built with a generous helping of God's spirit. Yet, like so many things that happen in our lives – it almost didn't.

Paul's travel was a tad meandering. He didn't have an appointment. His TripTik didn't say, "Destination: Philippi!" No, he was headed in a whole other direction and purpose – he didn't even intend to be in Europe! But here he is, and here she is. Conversation, connection, conversion. Coincidence or the convergence of human faithfulness and divine guidance, of human obedience and divine initiative? Just like the incarnation, these events were fully human and fully divine – steps guided and hearts opened.

You can sniff and snort and claim it all contrived in hindsight but I'd submit to you that if you let yourself, you'd tell stories of convergence in your own lives.

Sure, it could be coincidence and really, how would we know the difference? I've always liked Archbishop William Temple's remark, "When I pray, coincidences happen, and when I don't, they don't."

This whole idea of a vision from God is a little suspect – especially to the “frozen chosen” in our white marble mausoleum here. When Presbyterians want to catch God's vision, they first form a committee, and then they pray, and they thank God for working in the congregation, and then they discern God's vision for the church by hiring a consultant.

There's a difference – and it's not so subtle – between scripting God's vision and receiving a vision from God. Moreover, sometimes God's vision comes in the form of a veto.

Paul was on his way with his carefully planned TripTik in Asia – but God said “no.” Paul then was on his way to see a man in Macedonia – but God said “no.” Paul initially landed in Neapolis – but God said “no” and instead Paul met a woman by the river in Philippi.

Think of it when some of our most carefully laid out plans go awry, hit immovable roadblocks, or are simply derailed. Could it be God's veto that God is giving us a vision of a life or direction that doesn't fit our own? We're a bit arrogant, personally and as the church, when we assume that our carefully laid out TripTik of a life is exactly how God expects us to lead it! How easily we forget that authentic mission is always a response to a need within the community and not simply our need to serve. Our job in any case is to figure out where God is active in our lives and the world at large – and then, like Paul's trip to Europe – go to where God already is.

Catching God's vision isn't sitting on a mountaintop in deep contemplation waiting for a clear image in a dream. Catching God's vision might just be looking at our lives and asking what is God vetoing? Where in our lives is God simply saying “no” despite all of our frustrated effort to the contrary? When do we hear the divine, “re-calculating?”

When I was early in the process to become a pastor, I got a fair amount of attention mostly because I was older and making a somewhat significant lifestyle and career change. Some folks just assumed that I was on a magical mystery tour from rabid capitalist to pious preacher. Folks asked to hear about my “call to ministry!” Really...it was neither pleasant nor subtle. God simply provoked me into ministry. I was on a carefully plotted career path yet despite some success, I was unfulfilled, unsatisfied, unhappy – and doing my best to make those closest to me the same.

My wife, Walle, who suffers neither long nor quietly (I should be kinder especially on Mother's Day!) one evening sat me down and demanded to know what was wrong with me. I just blurted out – “I think I should go to seminary and be a minister.” The [cleaned up] response? “Darn it – then go!”

I tossed the maps and TourBooks of my life out the window and wandered into the admissions office a seminary the next day and two months later, at 40, was sitting in a classroom with a bunch of 20-something Bible wiz-kids. Nine years later I was standing in this pulpit feeling just like Paul did when he found Lydia and her people by the river in Philippi – home among people I couldn't wait to know better.

Catching God's vision is often yielding to veto.

Catching God's vision is often made evident in the quality of the relationships formed.

Paul and Lydia's story serves to remind us all of the basic power of relationships in our lives and in the church. With each person welcomed, with each person greeted during the coffee hour, with each new member – the church becomes more diverse, vibrant, and resilient and takes on an openness that goes beyond the point of view of a single group, person, or region.

Catching God's vision is often cluttered, convoluted, and contorted. It's rarely streamlined and linear and often avoids the shortest distance or clearest path – yet it's on those meanderings, those detours, even U-turns that we meet the people who transform our lives from something orderly to something lovely.

I am a witness to the power of catching God's vision, and I'm a joyful victim of God's veto and you are the eventual proof of both of those events. I know so many of you can make that same statement – so many sitting here because of a time that God said "no", or carefully mapped out plans went awry – and then you found people – diverse and different – to share that journey and your life was changed and you never looked back.

Well...do so now. Find and name those moments and people – chalk it up to coincidence if you must – but for me – I'll trust always that God's hand was in bringing you here.

We gather not by the river, nor are we any longer outside the city gates. We congregate instead in the city center, with a fishy steeple tucked in the midst of the great monoliths of commerce and trade. We're not here by accident. I pray that we're not here because we're too stubborn or lazy to move. I trust that we're here because God is working in this city and has called us to be here – co-laborers in the field. I doubt we have it right or even close to figuring it out. Sure God's patient "re-calculating" has been silenced by the din of our self-important lives.

Today...and everyday...we are called to be disciples. Listen, watch, and, yes, even dream – together – we'll catch God's vision, together, we'll serve, and together, we'll do great things for the glory of God who is good ...and who will provide.

Amen.