

On Being Convinced
Acts 16:9-15
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In a strange dream in a strange place, following strange circumstances, the Apostle Paul becomes convinced that he must go to the region of Macedonia, which is in what is now Northern Greece. Incidentally, for those who may have missed one of the late twentieth century's more forgettable political controversies, this is *not* the area now known as The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The F.Y.R.O.M., as it is affectionately known, achieved independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 though it was delayed by Greece's objection to the new state's use of what it considered a Greek name and symbols. Although Greece finally did lift its trade blockade, and the two countries agreed to normalize relations, disagreement over F.Y.R.O.M.'s use of the term "Macedonia," continues to this day, each side convinced that they have the proper claim to the name. As continental controversies go, it is pretty strange, but mostly harmless unless you are waiting to order new stationery for the Prime Minister's Office. But should you go to a map to see where today's story in Acts takes place, you will want to look southeast of F.Y.R.O.M. and east of the city of Thessalonika.

In his strange dream, Paul sees a man pleading with him, saying "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Paul and his companions are in the city of Troas, a place they had not intended to be and they are in this strange place because the

strange circumstance of the Spirit of Jesus who would not let them go into the Asian provinces. But with all this strangeness and uncertainty around them, Luke nevertheless tells us that “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.” It’s almost a throwaway line, a literary transition between one remarkable episode, the Spirit of Jesus frustrating the human efforts of the Apostle and his companions, and another, the conversion of Lydia by the riverside at Philippi. But, as you will probably not be surprised to learn, it is far more than just a clever rhetorical device to get Paul, Silas, and Timothy on the boat to their destination. Indeed, it is the very reason they journeyed westward and found themselves baptizing the household of the purple cloth vendor from Thyatira. You see, they were absolutely convinced that God had called them to proclaim the good news to the region of Macedonia. The vision is important yes, but more important is the fact that they discerned from the vision the call of God to proclaim the good news and they responded.

The word “convinced” has its roots in the Latin *convincere*, a word whose stem means “to conquer.” And so, to convince is to conquer. In Afghanistan, certain nations have “convinced” the citizens of that region, many of whom are now trying to “convince” them of the error of their ways. When we try to convince our children to clean their rooms, we have in mind conquering the mess, if not conquering their minds, but in truth it is the mind that needs convincing before the

trucks and puzzles and crayons go back into the toybox. When we go to the store to buy something we don't really need, we have been convinced by advertisers who have conquered our better judgment and a handful of our cash. When we are convinced of an idea, the idea has conquered us, overtaken us, occupied us. It has replaced or supplanted other competing ideas.

And so it is with Paul and his companions. They are convinced that it is the right thing to do to immediately go to Macedonia. And what has been conquered? For one thing, any doubt or fear that this was the right thing to do, even though as we shall read further along in Acts, it will result in Paul and Silas being severely flogged and thrown in prison. But more than that, what has been conquered are the believers themselves, for they are conquered by the Holy Spirit. They have given up any competing claim on their lives and submitted themselves to God's plan, God's vision, God's call to action. They have set aside the longings of their hearts for the longing of God's heart, their travel plans for God's itinerary, that the message of salvation might go out from Jerusalem to all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth, or at least the far side of the Roman Empire. What a great testimony to the faith of these early believers. He isn't called St. Paul for nothing.

Be that as it may, we give Paul too much credit if we think he didn't have his anxious moments about the mission to which he had been called. We make him too much of a saint if we think he didn't have second thoughts about entering yet another town only to be rejected in the synagogue and run out of town by those

threatened by his message. He was only human, after all. But we do not give Paul the credit he deserves if we do not acknowledge how thoroughly committed he was to bringing the good news to the Gentiles, even at the expense of his own life, and if we do not own the fact that as high as he may have set the bar, he is the standard by which we must inevitably measure our own commitment to the mission God has given us. Luke makes it as clear and simple as it can be when he says they were “convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news.” That is their motivation for going to Macedonia, the undeniable response to being conquered by the power of God’s vision for the world. Are we as convinced about our call from God, both personally and corporately? Have you personally, and have we as a body, been as conquered by the Holy Spirit so totally that our undeniable response is to risk comfort and invite ridicule in our efforts at bringing the living hope of the Gospel to the world by knowing and serving Jesus Christ?

Please do not misunderstand me. It is not to lay a guilt trip on you that I make these comparisons to the heroes of the faith. God loves us even when we don’t, or more importantly when we can’t, measure up. But what is the witness of Paul and Silas and Timothy worth if we do not aspire to emulate, in our own fashion, in our own context, these faithful followers of Christ? Why tell their story if not to inspire in us a desire to be convinced over and over again of the trust God places in we mere mortals to share the good news of God’s love? If not in flawed and compromised characters like these – Paul, who persecuted and murdered

Christians before he became one; Silas who was Paul's second choice for second fiddle after Barnabas; and Timothy whose credibility was suspect because his parents broke the rules and married outside their respective faiths – if not in unworthy characters like these, in whom shall we place our hopes that God will redeem and transform the rest of us unworthy characters through the grace of Jesus Christ? What hope does the world have if we are not convinced of our call as thoroughly as Paul was of his? Yes, we may fall short, but we'd better die trying.

My guess is that for most of you, the most important and influential people in your lives are people in whom you have been able to perceive that they were convinced that what they were doing was the right thing to do. Our parents, being convinced of their calling to care for us; our teachers, convinced of their calling to educate us; our friends, convinced of their affection for us even when we mess up; our spouses and partners, convinced of their dedication to us for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. And certainly most of us have our own heroes of the faith whose passion for Christ has helped us to be convinced that there is a God, even when it is awfully hard to believe it. We need those people in our lives to show us the way.

Next Sunday, we will be celebrating one of the most ancient rites of the church, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. And as part of that rite, each of you will take a solemn vow, “to guide and nurture this child by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging her to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member

of his church.” And by making that vow, you will be publicly stating not only that you are convinced that God is calling you to proclaim the good news to our little Lucia, but that you will act accordingly. And if you cannot in good faith make that vow, that’s OK, really it is, but when it comes time to answer the congregational question, I would invite to withhold your answer until you can, for to fulfill that vow properly and fully you need to be convinced. You see, Lucia, and every other child of God, needs us to be convinced and to act accordingly they are ever to know and serve Jesus Christ. They need us to be convinced and to act accordingly if they are to have anyone from whom they can learn what it means to be conquered by the living God. I mention this about next week’s baptism this week so you’ll have a week to think about how convinced you are to make that vow.

To help convince you, to help conquer all of our hearts anew, God has given us the wonderful gift of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. It was at this table that Christ revealed to his disciples just how convinced he was of the task God had given him, convinced enough to allow his own body to be broken and his own blood to be shed when a thousand angels were just a fingersnap away to rescue him. It has been at this table that the faithful through the centuries have been conquered by Christ’s grace and have gone forth to love and serve their families, their communities, their churches, even their enemies. And it is this table that once again invites us to let God conquer any fear or frustration we may have that keeps

us from responding to the calls from our community that come to us like Paul's from Macedonia. Let us come to the table. Amen.