

“The Mystery Man of Macedonia”
Acts 16:9-16
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Preached on Sunday, May 13 at San Jose, Costa Rica

In one sense, it is the most underwhelming of visions: there are no fearsome creatures, no natural disasters, not much symbolism to interpret, no threat involved. Simply “Come over to Macedonia and help us,” from the lips of the man of Macedonia. The dream was clear enough and understandable enough to get the job done, but as biblical visions go, it was pretty tame. And so Paul and his band of believers pack up their things and bring the Gospel to yet another part of the Roman empire, this time in what we would now call Europe, and more specifically northern Greece. They’ve been laboring in Asia Minor, what is now Turkey, but this vision impels them to go west and so we read about the places through which they passed to arrive in one of the biggest cities of the region, Philippi, named after the son of a former emperor, a colony filled with ex-military types in retirement. And there they find Lydia, about whom we heard, who listens, is baptized, and opens her home to Paul and his companions.

If we were to read on, we would hear about Paul’s interaction with a slave girl in Philippi, whom he releases from spirit possession much to the chagrin of her owners who were profitably exploiting that situation. And we would hear about Paul’s time in prison in Philippi after he was charged with disturbing the city for casting out that slave girl’s spirit. And we would hear about the earthquake which

released him and Silas from their chains and opened the doors to their cell, and how they prevented their Roman jailer from committing suicide and how they lead that man and his family to begin their journey as followers of Christ. And then we would hear about more of Paul's exploits and how he finally ends up in Athens, in yet another Roman province, and still, still, we would be waiting to meet the man of Macedonia. You see, during the entirety of his time in Macedonia, at least in the parts recorded for us, Paul never meets up with the subject of his vision, the one who asked him for help. You keep reading and reading and expecting this great reunion where the identity of the man of Macedonia is revealed, a culmination of the episode in which he give thanks for what Paul has done for him, but it never comes. The character remains but a moment in a dream, and Paul is soon off to Athens to challenge the Athenians to embrace not an unknown God, but the God "who made the world and everything in it," and we are left to wonder who the mystery man of Macedonia might have been.

One possibility is, of course, that he is Jesus, disguised perhaps as one of those whom he called "the least of these," the unknown and the infamous, the faceless and disinherited who would have seemed not to deserve blessing and rarely received it. The appearance of Christ then in the form of a regular citizen could be some sort of a test of the Apostle's newfound fervor for reaching the Gentiles with the good news of the Gospel. Sure, it's easy to get excited about ministry when Jesus comes a-callin', as happened to Paul on the road to Damascus,

but what about when it's those people who come up to you unsolicited at the stoplights in San Jose to ask for your spare change, or who show you their best, if limited, dance steps, and then want you to pay up? What about when it's those members of your family who can't seem to stay out of trouble and who keep coming to you for money, promising to pay it back, even though, like the man of Macedonia, you'll never see it again. Sure, it's easy to feel jazzed to do the Lord's work when the Lord asks you, but when it's one of "those" people? So maybe Jesus wants to see just how sincere Paul is.

Another possibility is that when they wrote down these stories, they just ran out of paper and couldn't include everything that happened in Macedonia, no matter how good or interesting it may have been. In the Gospel of John, we are told that "if every one of the things that Jesus did were written down, the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" and though the library might be smaller for Paul, it would certainly be big enough. It may be that the identity of the man of Macedonia and the great reunion that took place are recorded in one of those books that never got written, in one of those volumes of incredibly valuable spiritual conversations and divinely inspired meetings for which there simply can never be enough paper. As you look through the ECF Annual Report during our Annual Meeting, you'll read about a lot of ministry taking place in and through the members and friends of ECF, but I want you to remember that what is written down there is just a fraction of the experiences of

this group of Christians during the last year, and that everything you and we did in the name of Jesus Christ was worth writing down, but we just don't have enough space to store that many books. And so, only some of the ways we have been the heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ have been recorded for posterity, and perhaps like Paul's meeting with the man of Macedonia, future generations of ECFers will look back and wonder, but never find, a record of what impelled us to take the steps we took in the year 2006-2007.

Most likely of course, is that the "man" of Macedonia is Lydia, and he is the spirit possessed slave girl, and he is the Roman jailer, and he is the jailer's family, and everybody else whom Paul and Silas met as they shared the gospel during their travels. Most likely, the man of Macedonia was every person in that region who needed to hear how his or her life could be transformed by the God who raised Jesus from the dead, and who raises us to new life. "Come over to Macedonia and help us," he pleaded -- they pleaded. Come over and help us make sense of our place in this world, come over and help us be liberated from the situations that keep us from being all that God intends us to be, come over and help us learn how to be a blessing to others. The call for help went out, in the form of a vision in the night, in a dream, and Paul recognized it and responded, and numberless men of Macedonia and numberless women and children of Macedonia had their hopes met and their prayers answered by the help Paul and his companions brought with them.

My hunch is that Paul probably never expected to meet the man of Macedonia, and probably was never disappointed if he didn't. What I take from this is an important lesson for us today, that even though we may never come face to face with the person who inspired us, or who moved us to action, our ministry is still worth doing, even if we never get the gratification we might like to have. Paul was wise enough to discern from the vision that he was not to seek the man, but rather the ministry. In the way our society promotes the cult of personality, it is very easy to get caught up in the messenger rather than the message, to try to have our needs met through identifying ourselves with people who might as well be in a dream, instead of grounding ourselves in the call to serve and the one who has called us to serve. Paul could have spent his time in Macedonia searching for the man from his vision, but doing so would have meant missing the opportunities that presented themselves. He could have been so obsessed with meeting that man's particular needs, or finding out what the man thought the Macedonians' needs were that he would never have got around to meeting anyone's needs. But instead, he was able to recognize the vision for what it was – God's call to use the gifts he had been given – and responded to the vision using the gifts he had been given.

Let me give you a more tangible example of this kind of disinterested giving, and by disinterested, I do not mean uninterested. It is an understandable, if lamentable, trend in charitable giving that increasingly donors want to give what are called restricted gifts, funds which can only be used for a more narrow purpose

in the organization's activities. Examples of such gifts would be scholarships, or teacher education programs, or a specific collection of books for the library. This trend is understandable because it speaks to the desire of the donor to invest in something meaningful for him or her, and to have a more personal connection with the institution to which the gift is made. The trend is lamentable because it suggests that one or more of the following motivations is at work, namely that the gift is only worth giving if it more narrowly gratifies the giver, or that the giver does not trust the administration of the gift. An unrestricted gift is a lot more nebulous, isn't it? You don't know where or how the money will be used, or if it will be used responsibly, and even if it is reported to you that such and such activities were made possible by the gift, you can't really take someone there and say, "This is what I was able to provide for this institution." But an unrestricted gift implies a lot about the trust the donor has in the organization, that he or she believes that those charged with guiding the institution have the wisdom and the vision to use that gift to advance the overall well-being of the institution independent of the donor's more specific interests.

I believe Paul was making an unrestricted gift to the Kingdom when he went to Macedonia and ministered to everyone *but* the man who called him there. Indeed, in the story just before this one, we are told that although Paul wanted to go to Asia to speak the Word, they were prevented from doing so by the Spirit of Jesus. It's as if God was saying, I'll receive your gift, but you'll have to give it

freely so that I can direct its use where I believe it was needed. And Paul honored the Spirit and did not rebel against it. He did not place his own desires above those of his God and so he was led to offer the help the Macedonians needed. Sometimes it is tempting to offer ourselves only where we feel comfortable or when we are reasonably certain to gain something from the experience, or when we have an “interest” at stake. But the call to ministry, of an individual or a church, is a call to disinterested service, service which does not depend on our wants or needs but on those of God and those of the people in need. If that seems challenging, it is, but it is also the way of Christ, whose life and death demonstrated a disinterested form of love that we are called to follow. Christ was very interested in us, but practiced a disinterested love that led him to the cross. Paul may have wanted to go to Asia, but he ended up in Macedonia because he was willing to practice a disinterested form of ministry.

As ECF moves forward in discerning God’s vision for us, it may well be that we will be faced with the choice of going to Asia or going to Macedonia, and if we choose the latter, of seeking the man of Macedonia, or ministering to all the Macedonians. I’m excited about seeing how God means more specifically to use us as Christ’s heart, hands, and voice in Costa Rica’s English-speaking community, but a little afraid of where that might take us. Hey, I want to be hang out in my comfort zone as much as the next person. And so I will need to trust that God will always be at our side to strengthen us for whatever form of service we are called

to, no matter how far outside my personal comfort zone that may be. I hope you will be able to do the same. May God bless us as Paul was blessed when he responded to the vision of the mystery man of Macedonia. Amen.